

THE 3 INVESTIGATORS in

THE CASE OF THE STORM SURF





in

**THE CASE
OF THE
STORM SURF**

Pete rescues a boy injured by a shark attack off the coast of Rocky Beach. Before losing consciousness, the boy asks Pete to find a person known as Finley, who will face imminent danger. With only minimal clues available, The Three Investigators set off to look for Finley, find out what danger he is in, and save him from it. In the process, Jupiter, Pete and Bob face a series of obstacles that include a life-threatening situation where someone has to surf in the midst of a huge storm.

The Three Investigators
in
The Case of the Storm Surf

*Original German text by
Kari Erloff*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ???: Im Auge des Sturms

(The Three ???: In the Eye of the Storm)

by

Kari Erhoff

(2018)

Cover art by

Silvia Christoph

(2023-08-18)

Contents

- 1. Rescue Operation**
- 2. Who is George?**
- 3. Who is Finley?**
- 4. The Blond Man Appears**
- 5. ‘The Tides’**
- 6. What Happened on 17th August?**
- 7. Tired Investigators**
- 8. Liquid Teal**
- 9. Jupiter in Disguise**
- 10. Las Tunas Street**
- 11. Three Encounters of the Third Kind**
- 12. Pete’s Surfing Abilities**
- 13. The Charity Gala**
- 14. Interrogating Stacey Warren**
- 15. Beach Party in Malibu**
- 16. The Stand-In Surfer**
- 17. The Storm is Here!**
- 18. The Super Hero of Rocky Beach**

1. Rescue Operation

Someone shouted! It was high and shrill, but the individual words were lost in the roar of the waves. Then Pete Crenshaw spotted a man and a woman lying on their surfboards, paddling frantically with their arms. When they saw the Second Investigator, they screamed again.

“Sharks!”

“Over by the rocks!”

Pete didn’t hesitate for a second. He also started rowing with his arms, then jumped on his surfboard and let the next wave carry him towards the shore.

Here, off the cliffs of Rocky Beach, the surfing conditions were excellent. However, there were also some dangers lurking in the water. In the east of the bay, there were jagged rocks, some of them not visible from above the water. In the west, a strong current made it easy to be swept out to sea.

Then there were the sharks... Sometimes not a single one of them was sighted for months and then out of a sudden, several incidents would crop up within a few days. Nevertheless, surfers were always drawn to this spot.

Pete steered his board into the foaming white water. That was it for surfing today. Too bad, he hadn’t been in the water for long. Anyway, the weather conditions were not ideal. The surface of the waves was being blown away more and more by the wind.

The other two surfers were already wading hurriedly through the shallow water to the stony stretch of beach below the cliff—without turning back to the sea. Pete, on the other hand, took one more look at the turbulent Pacific. For a moment, he expected to see the grey dorsal fin of the shark, but the picture that presented itself was much more frightening!

A boy was still out there, frantically waving one arm and clinging to his surfboard with the other! Pete recognized the orange stripes on his wetsuit as he had seen the boy around earlier today. As it was, he had not cut too good a figure on the board.

“Jump on!” Pete mumbled as if telling the boy what to do. “Use the wave!”

However, the wave built up too slowly. Before the boy had the slightest chance, he toppled off the board. Again, someone screamed. It took Pete a few seconds to realize that the scream was coming from his own mouth.

Out at sea, the boy had fought his way back to the water surface. His hands clawed at the board.

“We have to get help!” one of the two surfers shouted. Nevertheless, the man did not move a bit. The woman also seemed paralysed.

Pete broke free from his rigidity. He dropped his board and plunged head-first into the water. He had no plan as there was no time to think.

“What are you doing?” the woman shouted at Pete. “Come back!”

“You can’t save him!”

“If a shark gets you, you’ll get yourself killed!”

Pete did not listen. He dived under a small wave and now saw the boy’s white surfboard drifting straight towards him. When Pete almost reached, the boy slipped off the board again. Pete got hold of him and dragged him back up.

“Get on the board!” he yelled.

However, the boy kept slipping off. He left red marks on the white surfboard. Pete immediately realized that it was blood! There could hardly be a more dangerous bait for sharks.

What else had Pete learned about shark attacks? A flood of rules rushed through his head—‘don’t wear brightly coloured clothes’; ‘never enter the water if you’re bleeding’; ‘don’t paddle away frantically’; ‘don’t swim in the murk’; ‘don’t swim if there are prey or fish waste in the water’—but most of them were useless in this situation. In any case, a shark is faster than a swimmer! All these rules ran through Pete’s thoughts in an endless loop.

Meanwhile, the churning water around him was coloured red. Pete gave up trying to push the injured boy onto his surfboard. Like a lifeguard, he grabbed him and carried out a contact tow rescue. If a shark attacked him, he might be able to fend it off with a kick to the gills. That was the most sensitive part of the predatory fish.

“Hold on!” Pete yelled to the injured boy, primarily to calm him down. “Everything will be all right!”

No sooner had he uttered the words than he was caught by a huge wave. The world spun—above and below—blurred into a single chaos of foam and water. A strong current caught Pete. Resistance was futile. The Second Investigator could do nothing but hold the boy.

Then he felt ground under his feet. Somewhere above him was light. His head broke through the water surface. He spat salt water, coughed, retched and greedily inhaled the fresh morning air. Legs appeared to his left and right.

“That was close!” yelled the woman who had been waiting on the beach with her partner.

The man bent over the injured boy. “Is he unconscious?”

The woman made a horrified face. “He’s covered in blood!”

“Come on! Call an ambulance!” Pete burst out as he pulled the boy completely onto the beach.

The boy’s wetsuit was torn on the right side, revealing a large bite wound on his upper body. The bleeding had to be stopped as soon as possible.

“A towel! Someone get me a towel!” Pete shouted.

“I was able to hurt the shark... with my knife.” The boy slowly opened his eyes as he spoke. His face looked as if it was moulded from white wax.

Pete estimated him to be no more than twenty years old. On his lower leg, he wore a belt for a diving knife. It was a bit unusual for a surfer, but in this case, it might have been a blessing.

“I got him, but he got me too—the beast!” the boy muttered.

“Don’t talk!” Pete commanded. He didn’t want to tell the surfer how critical the situation was. “It’s all good, but you’d better save your strength.”

“I’m so cold!” the boy said softly.

“Here!” The woman came back and handed Pete a towel.

“Thank you!” The Second Investigator pressed the cloth tightly over the wound and smiled encouragingly at the boy. “The cold is from the wind.”

“I think it’s more likely that the cold is from blood loss,” the woman interjected.

Pete looked up at her and shook his head almost imperceptibly. The injured boy should not get any more upset. Besides, he had to stay conscious! As he was about to close his eyes, Pete increased the pressure on the wound. “What is your name?” he asked aloud.

“Matt.”

“Are you from around here?”

“No.”

Behind Pete, hurried footsteps sounded on the stony beach. The woman's partner was coming back. "I've called an ambulance! They will be here soon."

The injured boy tried to get up. Pete held him tightly. "Don't move!"

"Phew!" the man turned away. "I can't even look."

"I have... to tell you something!" the boy whispered to Pete.

"Me?" Pete asked in astonishment.

Behind him, the two surfers had started a loud debate about whether sharks were terrible beasts or miraculous animals worthy of protection. Meanwhile, a siren sounded in the distance. It was approaching at a rapid speed.

"What?" Pete asked. However, the boy just stared motionlessly at the sky. Pete's heart beat faster. "Hey, Matt! Hey!"

"I'm... still here..." the boy struggled to say. He was breathing heavily. His face was getting paler by the minute.

Pete looked up. Up on the coast road, the ambulance stopped. The two surfers ran towards the ambulance. They were probably glad to finally be able to do something.

"Everything will be all right!" Pete repeated mechanically, even though he weren't sure about it.

"You're Pete Crenshaw, aren't you?" The boy tried to grab Pete by the arm, but didn't have enough strength left to do so. "—Of The... Three Investigators."

Pete looked at him in surprise. "How did—"

"Never mind!" Matt interrupted him. "You have to... take a case for me! In my van... blue van..." Matt had to pause because he was running out of strength.

Meanwhile, two paramedics descended the steps to the beach with a stretcher.

"The keys are... in my backpack." Matt muttered as he made a barely visible movement with his arm. "Look..." His voice grew softer and softer that the Second Investigator had to strain to listen to him. "Look at *The Tides*, that—"

A seagull screeched above their heads, making sure Pete didn't hear the rest of the sentence. "What did you say?"

"Find Finley! He's in danger! Talk to George, he—" After that, the boy's speech became so slurred that Pete only heard fragments. He thought he heard 'caution', 'blond man' and 'attacker'. In addition, the word 'surfer' came up twice.

There was the seagull screeching again. It was almost as if it was having fun disrupting the conversation. Annoyed, Pete looked up at the sky.

When he turned back to Matt, he saw that the boy had lost consciousness.

2. Who is George?

They needed a safe hiding place! Jupiter Jones looked around the salvage yard frantically. The pile of timber was too far away, and the outdoor workshop was in an unreachable distance. What he and his friend Bob Andrews needed now was a spacious cupboard or a giant crate!

His gaze lingered on the portable toilet Uncle Titus had just purchased. Together with several scaffolds, two wheelbarrows and various tools, it was part of the remains from a construction site. Jupiter rejected the idea. The toilet was too narrow for two people. Besides, it was in a bad condition, not to mention the disgusting smell.

“Too late!” Bob groaned. “Your aunt has seen us!”

In fact, Mrs Jones was heading purposefully towards the boys. Her flowered apron fluttered in the summer wind. Officially, Jupiter’s uncle Titus Jones was the boss of The Jones Salvage Yard, but everyone knew that it was actually his wife Mathilda who was in charge. She ran a tight ship in the house and made sure that everything was in order in the salvage yard. She especially liked to use her nephew Jupiter and his two best friends for this.

“What are you doing here?” she called out to them as if it were strictly forbidden to just stand outside and talk to each other on a summer day during the holidays. “Titus brought a load of useless stuff from Camarillo yesterday. They cleared out a cinema there. You can start sorting and cleaning everything right away. The popcorn machine looks like it’s never been cleaned.”

Jupiter breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently Aunt Mathilda had forgotten about the things from the construction site. Cleaning a dirty popcorn machine was certainly not much fun, but it was a lot better than cleaning a portable toilet.

“We’ll take care of it,” he promised.

“Wonderful,” said Aunt Mathilda with satisfaction. “—And I see you are getting reinforcements!”

Jupiter peered past his aunt to the gate of the salvage yard. There, Pete was parking his bicycle. There was a surfboard clamped to the side.

“I have to take care of some bills now,” Mrs Jones announced. She turned on her heel and shortly after, she went into the office of the salvage yard.

“Work again?” Pete asked as he joined his friends.

“Not everyone goes surfing every free minute,” Jupiter replied instead of an answer.

Pete’s face was flushed and he looked tense. “I just came from the hospital.”

“From the hospital? What happened?” asked Bob worriedly.

“A surfer has been attacked by a shark.” Pete lowered himself onto the edge of an old bathtub. “Luckily he had a small diving knife with him and was able to fight off the shark with it.”

“It all depends on the perspective,” Jupiter commented. “For the shark, the outcome of the encounter was probably fatal and therefore less fortunate.”

Bob raised his eyebrows disapprovingly. “Jupe!”

“I’m not saying the surfer did anything wrong,” the First Investigator replied. “I merely —”

“Is the surfer badly injured?” Bob interrupted Jupe’s remarks and directed the question to Pete.

“Yeah, but I think the chances are pretty good that he’ll pull through,” Pete replied. “If I understood the paramedics correctly, the wound wasn’t quite as bad as it looked.”

Jupe nodded slowly. “Then the surfer was really lucky!”

“Fellas, we have a case!” Pete then blurted out. “I just got the assignment on the beach!”

“Unfortunately we also have an order from Aunt Mathilda,” said Jupiter contritely. “I’m afraid we can’t avoid taking on the task of refurbishing my uncle’s latest acquisitions.”

“Jupe, I’m talking about a case!” Pete was annoyed at the First Investigator’s turgid way of speaking. He had long been used to his friend’s fondness for expressing himself in an elevated manner. “Maybe a person is in danger! When have you ever prioritized something else over a case?”

Jupiter took a deep breath. Then his face took on a determined expression. “Under these circumstances, we can certainly ask Aunt Mathilda for a postponement—provided it really is a case and a dangerous situation.”

“At least it sounded like it!” In brief words, Pete reported what had happened on the beach.

When he had finished, Jupiter began to walk slowly up and down. “So a young man called Matt hires us to find a certain Finley. We’re to go to his blue van, look at the tides and talk to a certain George,” the First Investigator summarized.

“Right,” said Pete. “I’ve been in his van, but I haven’t found anything linked to a Finley... and the tides are, of course, the rise and fall of sea levels. Every surfer has an eye on those.”

“Where is the van now?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“I parked it at the hospital,” Pete replied. “I went in to give Matt his backpack but unfortunately I couldn’t see him because he was being operated on. I then handed his backpack to the hospital staff.”

Jupiter looked thoughtful. “Did you check the contents of the backpack?”

Pete nodded. “Inside was a wallet with money, credit card and driver’s licence, sunscreen and...” He paused meaningfully. “—This!” He took out a card from his pocket and showed it to his friends. It said:



“Our card!” Bob exclaimed.

The card was crumpled and dirty. A half-moon shaped black-brown stain was emblazoned on the lower left side.

“The dirt didn’t come from me,” Pete said, “and Matt’s things were otherwise downright spotlessly clean. Maybe he found our card somewhere.”

“Then how did he know who you were?” Jupiter wondered.

"I know that! This was also in his backpack..." The Second Investigator held out to Jupiter a newspaper article that someone had cut out. Just like the card, it was dirty and crumpled. Under the headline 'The Super Heroes of Rocky Beach' was a photo of The Three Investigators.

"The article is from a March issue of *Rocky Beach Today*," Jupe stated sullenly. "It was an extremely unobjective and poorly researched report on our work."

"What about this George we're supposed to talk to?" pondered Bob. "Maybe he knows more. It's possible he gave Matt the card."

"It could be George Davies," Pete said. "He has a holiday job at a kiosk on the main beach. From there he could watch the surfers riding the waves. It's a good fit. If I understand Matt correctly, everything has something to do with a surfer, or with several surfers."

"Then maybe George had seen something!" speculated Bob.

"Fellas!" Jupiter raised a hand. "Please, no rash theories! We should look at the facts first. For that we will go to Headquarters."

The headquarters of The Three Investigators was an old mobile home trailer hidden under a mountain of junk. From the outside, it was hard to guess that underneath the junk was a complete office—fitted with a small laboratory and a kitchenette. Access to the office was only through secret passages. One of them was a large, discarded refrigerator, which The Three Investigators called the Cold Gate.

When no outsiders were looking, Jupiter opened the fridge door and climbed in. There, he triggered a secret mechanism that allowed him to push the back wall aside. Behind it, completely buried under scrap metal, was a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal that led to the trailer. Pete and Bob followed behind.

As the First Investigator sat down in his favourite chair and clasped his hands, he thought of Aunt Mathilda. There would definitely be a thunderstorm later. After all, the boys simply ignored her order, but the case clearly had priority.

"I hereby declare our first session in this case open," Jupiter announced. "Let's start with the information we already have."

Bob took a pad out of a dented filing cabinet and grabbed a pen. He wrote down the names 'Finley' and 'George'. Under a big question mark he wrote the terms Pete wasn't quite sure of: 'caution', 'blond man', 'attacker' and 'surfer'. Then he turned to Pete. "Do you remember what was on Matt's driver's licence?"

"No," Pete replied. He sat down on an office chair whose castor wheels squeaked with every movement. "I can't remember things like that, but I wrote it down." Briskly, he pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and tossed it to Bob. Bob missed catching it and the note landed on the floor.

"You need to work on your reflexes." Pete grinned.

Bob just shook his head and picked up the note. "Matthew James Kooning," he read out.

"He seems to be an interstate visitor," Pete explained. "His address is in Detroit, Michigan."

"That's a start," Jupiter stated with satisfaction. "Bob, it's your job to find out more about our client. Who is Matt and what brought him here to Rocky Beach?"

"What about George? And this Finley guy who's in danger?" asked Pete. "It almost sounded like Matt thinks we know them."

Jupiter leaned back in his chair. "Possibly, but additional information may also be needed to find these people. After all, Matt specifically pointed you to his van."

"It's not just a van but a real surfer mobile," Pete said.

"All that matters to us at first is whether you have thoroughly examined the interior."

“Of course,” Pete affirmed. “I found a sleeping bag, a toothbrush, two books and a box of food. There is no evidence of a Finley or a George, no photos, no notebook, no diary, no more business cards or newspaper clippings.”

“At least we have a clue.” Jupiter stood up and entered the small laboratory of Headquarters. There he reached for a microscope. He placed the dirty, crumpled business card on the microscope stage and peered through the eyepiece. Next he examined the newspaper article in the same way. Satisfied, he switched off the light in the lab and rejoined his friends.

“The stain reminds me of the imprint of a cup,” Pete said impatiently.

“That’s right, Pete.” The First Investigator looked up. “Someone has put a cup of coffee down on the card.”

“You can tell it’s coffee using the microscope?” Pete wondered.

“Better... I sniffed the card,” Juve replied. “Through the microscope I could see traces of brown particles, which could be coffee grounds. The same goes for the newspaper article. Here I could also make out traces of oil and tar.”

Bob laughed dryly and tapped his pen on the writing pad. “All right, then. If the stain isn’t Matt’s, all we have to do is find someone who drinks coffee.”

“More precisely, someone who brews coarse-grained coffee without a filter.” Jupiter passed over Bob’s ironic tone. “—Someone who, by the way, has little regard for cleanliness, has traces of oil or tar on his fingers when he touched the card and obviously saw a reason to keep our business card.”

“There are endless people eligible there,” Pete said.

“Not if you also bring the name ‘George’ into play and keep the maritime background of the case in mind.” Juve grinned broadly.

“Is there another George at the beach and the waterfront besides George Davies?” Pete wondered.

“Think of the harbour that lies not far from Rocky Beach’s most popular surfing spot. What untidy contemporary there owns a boat with a tarred bottom and has a liking for brewing Egyptian coffee?”

“Sure!” Bob sat up straight. “Rubbish-George!”

“Exactly!” said Juve.

Rubbish-George was a vagrant who now lived on a boat in the harbour of Rocky Beach. The Three Investigators had had frequent dealings with him during their investigations so it was quite possible that he possessed a business card of the investigators.

“It could be, but it doesn’t have to be,” Pete said. “To be honest, I find this a bit far-fetched.”

“I would call it a conjecture,” Juve said. “If you’re looking for someone at the beach, Rubbish-George is a good person to start with. It can’t hurt to ask him about the case. As soon as I’ve talked to Aunt Mathilda, I’ll make a detour to the harbour.”

“She won’t let you go,” Bob surmised.

“She will,” Juve replied. “Just let me handle it. Meanwhile, you have to check on Matt Kooning. Pete can go to the beach and talk to George Davies.”

“Okay. There I can also ask around among the surfers if anyone knows a Finley,” Pete offered.

Juve hesitated. “Maybe that’s not a good idea for now.”

“Why not?”

“We don’t know who is threatening Finley,” Juve said. “Maybe by asking the wrong question in the wrong place, we’re just putting him in danger.”

3. Who is Finley?

The harbour of Rocky Beach was well frequented. The weather had become increasingly sunny in the course of the morning and a pleasant wind was blowing.

Sailing enthusiasts were getting their yachts ready for a trip, guests at the harbour café were sitting in the sun, and small motorboats were chugging through the clear, blue-green water. A few tourists were taking photos of the pelicans in the harbour basin and two boys were looking at colourful wetsuits and T-shirts in front of a surf shop.

It seemed to Jupiter that everyone was in a good mood. He himself was still a bit groggy from the conversation with his aunt. Although she had a big heart, Aunt Mathilda could be very strict. She had little sympathy for spontaneous investigations during working hours. How could anyone seriously go after criminals when there was work to clean a dirty popcorn machine and a smelly portable toilet? Jupiter had had to promise to do some extra shifts to make up for it.

The First Investigator pushed aside thoughts of the salvage yard and made his way purposefully to Rubbish-George's boat. It lay somewhat apart from the sleek white yachts. Jupe had to walk over a rickety jetty, the stability of which he did not quite trust. When he finally reached the floating dwelling, there was no one on deck.

"Hello?" called Jupiter loudly. "George?"

There was no reply. Maybe he wasn't there.

Every now and then, Rubbish-George took jobs in the harbour. Jupiter wondered if he should just come back later, when he heard a rumbling noise below deck. Someone was on the boat! The First Investigator climbed awkwardly aboard.

"George?" he called out again. Now he saw that the door to the cabin was open. A short staircase led down into the belly of the boat. Again he heard a noise from below. Why didn't Rubbish-George answer him? Jupiter's curiosity was aroused.

Slowly he descended the steps. An unpleasant mixture of smells of fuel, boiled beans, sewage and sweetish spices was in the air. The First Investigator wrinkled his nose and looked around. In front of him lay an old mattress with a rumpled bedspread. Next to it was a bowl of incense, hence the sweet smell. The smoke rose in grey spirals and swirled in the low cabin. Jupiter suppressed a cough.

To his left was an area separated by a curtain. What was to the right, Jupiter could not make out. Without warning, the curtain moved, and then things went haywire.

Someone jumped towards the First Investigator. A push swept him off the last step of the stairs, and before he could turn to face the attacker, a heavy object whizzed down on him!

The wave rolled in. Pete began to paddle. His fingers paddled through the cold water. He felt his pulse quicken and tensed his muscles.

Now! Pete jumped onto the board. Salty water splashed up. He bent his knees slightly, directed the board to the right and picked up speed. Out of the corner of his eye, the Second Investigator saw the wall of water he was riding along. The wave was growing over him. Soon the tunnel would close.

Although the ride lasted only a few seconds, it felt to Pete as if he was in a world without time. Behind him, the masses of water broke into white foam and he reappeared in reality. Only now did he hear the roar of the sea.

Pete narrowed his eyes and tried to make out the individuals on the surfboards near him. He couldn't. The sunlight was reflected off the sea in thousands of tiny gold dots. It was magnificent!

Jupiter had said that he should not openly ask about a Finley, but there was certainly no harm in mingling with the surfers. After all, that was part of the case. In fact, the Second Investigator was investigating right now—on a surfboard!

Most of the time, George Davies had been too busy to talk to Pete in private. During the holidays, Rocky Beach's main beach was just too busy. George could hardly keep up with pouring out Cokes, water and lemonade. Still, Pete had the twinge of a guilty conscience. Jupiter and Bob were out helping Matt and he was having fun at sea.

"First class surfing!"

Pete turned to the side. A few other surfers had gathered beside him. Among them was Brandon Rink, a boy from his biology class. Pete laid down on his board and let a small wave carry him a bit. "Your kick flip was pretty good!"

"Thank you!" said Brandon delightedly.

"Even a blind squirrel finds a nut once in a while," someone said in a raspy voice.

"Stenseth! I see that you're as friendly as ever." Pete knew the surfer. He was about his age, but didn't go to school in Rocky Beach, instead he attended Green Canyon High School.

"That's the way I am, Crenshaw." The boy brushed his wet, black hair out of his forehead.

Before Pete or Brandon could say anything back, he paddled off. Out of the corner of his eye, the Second Investigator saw a wave build up behind him. Seconds later, Stenseth was standing on the board.

"I wish him an embarrassing wipe-out!" said Brandon.

"I don't think he'll ever get swept off the board easily." Pete had to admit without envy that Stenseth was exceptionally talented.

"Unfortunately, I believe you're right. He is the undisputed king of the waves here this summer, at least while Jeffrey is away. I bet he'll win the Summer Surf competition next year and turn pro for a well-known label." Brandon made a scowling face. "Anyway, next to him I always feel like a monkey on an ironing board."

"Don't let Stenseth intimidate you," Pete replied. "He can't do anything except surf. Apart from that, Jeffrey will definitely compete next year and then we'll see who wins."

Brandon nodded. "Perhaps you could even challenge him."

"I'm not good enough," Pete said grudgingly.

Brandon had hit a sore spot. Pete had tried to fit surfing, school and investigation activities alongside several sports. Sometimes it felt like he was doing everything halfway. Besides, Pete's girlfriend Kelly had broken up with him again because he barely had time for her.

"Are you all right?" asked Brandon.

"Yeah, everything's great." Pete reflected. "I think I'll take a break."

Just then the ice cream man pushed his cart with the colourful umbrella along the boardwalk, causing the crowd at the drinks kiosk to die down. If Pete wanted to talk to George, it was now.

Shortly afterwards, the Second Investigator came out of the water with his surfboard under his arm.

The small beach drinks kiosk was actually just a hut made of driftwood, straw and bamboo mats. It stood directly on the promenade. The place was bustling with activity. A group of surfers sat on the low wall that separated the path from the beach.

A couple of girls on skateboards smiled at Pete. He greeted them curtly. Then he dodged a blond man in sunglasses who was talking on his mobile phone while walking and staring out to the sea. There, Brandon was just falling off the board.

"Hi, Pete!" George called out as the Second Investigator reached the kiosk. "Let me guess, you want a large Coke and a peanut-flavoured candy bar, right?"

Pete shook his head. "Hello, George. No, thanks. Today I just need some information."

"Storm!" A bearded man in a flowery shirt walked past them. "A storm is coming! And the waves will swallow us up!"

Pete looked at him in confusion.

George waved it off. "Some people think we're in for a big storm... or rather, an average storm with bigger than average waves."

"But so far the weather services haven't announced anything dramatic." Pete tapped on his board as if that would bring good luck.

"Let's see how it turns out," George said, "but now for you. You wanted to know something?"

Pete nodded. "I'm looking for someone. Have you by any chance spoken to a boy called Matt in the last few days? He has short brown curly hair and isn't from around here."

George thought for a moment. "I can't remember. Quite a lot of people come here to get drinks."

"Too bad." Pete tapped his fingertips thoughtfully on his surfboard.

He wondered if he should ask George about Finley after all. George was all right. He wasn't exactly close friends with The Three Investigators, but Pete had known him since primary school days. However, Jupiter kept emphasizing that no one was to be trusted. After all, even a seemingly harmless grandma could be a stone-cold criminal, and one's own girlfriend a traitor.

Pete, however, found that he had to take a risk now and then if he wanted to learn more. George was a good source of information. He had the beach in view all day and got to talk to many people. Besides, Matt had specifically said he should talk to a George.

"Does the name Finley mean anything to you?"

"A surfer?" asked George.

"Probably," Pete replied.

"Sure." George laughed. "What is it about him?"

"Uh..." Pete began sheepishly, "actually, I don't know who he is."

"You should..." George said.

"How come?"

"You were just out there surfing with him!"

4. The Blond Man Appears

Stars flashed... or were they points of light? Jupiter's knees gave way. His left shoulder throbbed. The First Investigator slumped. With one hand he caught himself. A sharp pain twitched through his wrist.

"Jupiter Jones?" Rubbish-George reared up in front of him. "What's this all about?"

Jupiter looked up at the man. He groaned. "I could ask you the same thing."

Rubbish-George put down the frying pan he was holding in his hands. The remains of white beans, bacon and tomato sauce were stuck in it. Jupiter suspected that George had used it to knock him down.

"This is my boat! And I don't appreciate people coming into my cabin." Rubbish-George looked reproachfully at Jupiter.

"I called loudly for you." Jupiter sat up slowly. "—Several times, in fact. You didn't answer."

"No wonder." George pointed to a pair of headphones he wore around his neck. A cable led to a portable audio player. The device looked like something from twenty years ago, but it still seemed to work. Only now did Jupe hear the music coming from the headphones.

"This is my cleaning mix—reggae, blues and samba. You have to listen to it loud."

The First Investigator looked around doubtfully. It didn't look like George cleaned often—or ever.

The man interpreted Jupiter's look correctly. "I was just about to start. Have to get into the right mood with the music first—especially when I have to do the dishes."

"Hmm..." was all Jupiter said. He rubbed his aching shoulder.

"Be glad I didn't smash a frying pan over your head," George said. "Coffee?"

"With lots of sugar!" Jupiter moaned softly and continued rubbing his shoulder.

George turned to the small kitchen corner. "What brings you here? Another case?"

"We have an assignment," Jupiter reported, "but our client is in hospital right now."

"What a shame..." Rubbish-George remarked.

"The young man's name is Matt Kooning. He had a card of ours with him and said we should talk to a George."

"—So you come to me." George looked for two clean mugs. "Good call! I actually recommended that guy hire you three. Gave him the card and an article about you guys."

Jupiter let go of his shoulder. "Do you know what Matt wanted?"

"Hmm... I've been a bit forgetful lately," George grumbled. "It comes with age... but a couple of smackers might jog my memory."

Jupiter grimaced. Then he dug out five bucks and laid it on a small folding table in front of the vagrant.

"Hmm... now I remember!" George said. "Matt came to Rocky Beach to look for someone. He did a pretty stupid job of it, though—no idea about surfing; no idea how to drive a manual transmission vehicle; no idea how to act inconspicuous... He almost got robbed at the harbour café. I stopped it and then we started chatting."

"Was he looking for somebody named Finley by any chance?"

Rubbish-George placed two metal mugs on the table and poured coffee from a flask. “If you already know everything, why are you asking me?”

“We only know a few facts so far,” Jupiter admitted.

George pushed a metal mug towards the First Investigator. Inside were several lumps of sugar. “All right. Matt was looking for a surfer around here. He didn’t know him, didn’t know his last name and had no idea how to proceed. At least he had some photos with him—of a Finley who is supposedly in danger.”

“Did he give you any details on that?”

“No... Seemed to me that the fellow had no plan. That’s why I advised him to hire you guys. He pocketed the card and gave me a twenty—out of some fancy, expensive wallet.”

“Were you also able to tell him who Finley is?” Jupiter carefully took a sip of coffee. The taste was disgusting.

“See this thing here?” George held up his portable audio player. “Looks pretty old but still works fine. Problem is that it need batteries. I can’t just fish a couple of old batteries from the trash. I need new ones.”

“So?” Jupiter pretended not to understand the vagrant.

“Rechargeable batteries are pretty expensive,” George hinted.

The First Investigator sighed and dug out another five bucks.

“Who was that you were asking about?” George continued.

“Finley,” Jupe repeated. “Do you know who Finley is?”

“Sure. I recognized the guy in the photos,” George said. “He’s still young, maybe your age. Takes jobs in the harbour sometimes and also works at Liquid Teal—that’s the surf shop next to the diving school.”

“I know that place.”

George laughed out. “Hard to believe. You don’t strike me as a keen surfer.”

“I prefer swimming,” Jupiter said, “but my uncle knows the two owners of Liquid Teal.”

“Finley can only dream of their surfboards anyway,” Rubbish-George said. “The prices are saltier than the sea water.”

When Jupiter stepped back into the sunlight a short time later, he still had the awful taste in his mouth. In addition, his shirt smelled of incense. Thoughtfully, he climbed over the railing.

Rubbish-George, meanwhile, looked out to the sea. “Something’s brewing! I can feel it in my bones... and I can count on them. We’re in for a nice storm!”

Pete felt silly—but he couldn’t blame himself for not knowing that Finley’s surname was Stenseth. A year ago or so, when Pete first met him, Finley had been calling other surfers by their surnames... and he himself had been known as Stenseth.

Fortunately, George Davies had been able to help the Second Investigator. The only question was whether Finley Stenseth was the Finley who was supposed to be in danger.

It seemed that all of Rocky Beach was determined to spend the afternoon on the beach. However, the dark-haired boy was just leaving. With long strides, he entered the promenade with his surfboard firmly in his grasp.

Pete hurriedly said goodbye to George and set off in pursuit. It was not so easy and after a few metres, he had lost sight of Finley in the crowd. At least Pete had an idea where Finley was going.

Behind the car park and the bike racks was a small building housing the public changing rooms, showers and toilets. At the back of it were lockers where beach-goers could store their

bags.

When Pete reached the car park, he quickened his steps. Sure enough, he spotted Finley and his surfboard again.

He also saw the man with the mobile phone whom he had seen on the beach promenade. It was not only his light blond hair that made him stand out. His clothes were not at all like those of a typical beach-goer. He wore an open leather jacket and an aubergine-coloured shirt made of a flowing fabric with tight black jeans and blue cowboy boots. The man was definitely dressed too warm for the weather, but that didn't seem to bother him. It almost seemed to Pete that he was following Finley.

Finley now circled the public changing rooms and went to the back where the lockers were. The man, on the other hand, stopped by a bench and pulled out his mobile phone again. The Second Investigator could smell his aftershave as he passed him.

Finley opened a locker and pulled out a battered backpack. Pete had locked his things in Locker Number 67 which was very close to where Finley was standing.

"Could it be that you are being followed?" asked Pete quietly as he turned the key in the lock.

Finley didn't even look up. "Mind your own business, Crenshaw!"

Only now did Pete notice a reddish-blue bruise on Finley's chin. Had Finley been in a fight or had it been an accident?

"I'm just saying—" Pete started again.

The dark-haired boy snorted. "Don't you have anything to do? Surely your parents have a nice green lawn that desperately needs mowing?"

"It's a man, strikingly blond," Pete murmured. "He was standing on the promenade earlier, watching the sea."

Now Finley did look up. "So what?"

"Do you know a Matt?" asked Pete.

"Never heard of him." Finley shouldered his backpack.

Pete took a step towards him. "Matthew James Kooning?"

Something flickered in Finley's gaze that Pete could not interpret. Was it fear? Or anger? Or suspicion?

"Don't know him, don't want to know him, neither him nor your blond man. I have to go now."

Pete wanted to get the card of The Three Investigators out of his own backpack, but he was afraid that Finley would then make fun of him. "Look, I'll write down my number for you."

Finley laughed out. "What for? I'm not interested in talking to someone who can't even surf properly."

"Uh..." Pete muttered. Since Finley was making fun of him anyway, he now decided to pull out the business card after all.

"Look here, Stenseth," Pete began as he held out the card to Finley. "My friends and I are investigators—"

Finley didn't even look at the card. "Get lost, Crenshaw." With these words he stomped away.

Pete stood there stunned at the arrogance of Finley. For a moment, the Second Investigator did not know the best way to proceed from here.

As Finley walked briskly ahead, suddenly Pete noticed that the blond man reappeared and was following Finley again.

A blond man! The Second Investigator had heard that from someone else! Matt! Had he tried to warn him about this man?

5. 'The Tides'

"Finley was trying to hide something from me!" Pete was literally shouting to Jupiter on his mobile phone. "I bet he knows Matt!"

"Quite possibly," Jupiter said. "Why didn't you continue to follow him?"

"He got on the bus—the bus going towards Seven Pines and Malibu."

"And the blond man?"

"He immediately went back to the car park and drove off in his car," Pete reported. "A Cadillac XTS, black. California licence plate."

"Did he follow the bus?"

"It looked like he did—but I was far behind on my bike." He paused for a moment. "—But you know what, Juve? I still have the key to Matt's van!"

"Hmm..." Jupiter mumbled. "Of course, that's very convenient for our investigations."

"When I handed his backpack in at the hospital, I forgot to put the van key in it," Pete continued. "I guess I was still pretty confused because of the shark and all the blood!"

"Come pick me up now outside the surf shop and we'll go to the hospital!" Jupiter decided. "Tell Bob to go there right away."

Pete made a long face, which Jupiter could not see, of course. "I actually wanted to take a shower and then eat something. I've been out since early this morning!"

"We're in the middle of a case! You can shower and eat later!"

The red evening sun was reflected in the windscreen of the van. The blue vehicle was not exactly new, but it was also not one of the very old models that were particularly popular with surfers.

Pete unlocked the doors and went into the cab. Meanwhile, Jupiter went through the side door.

There was a half-height cupboard with drawers, on top of which was a cooker top and a tiny sink. The back seats were folded out to form a berth. Matt had a green sleeping bag that lay folded in a corner. By all accounts, he was a very tidy fellow. The rubbish was stowed in a locked bin, all the laundry was folded in the wardrobe, and the shoes were in specially designed bags. There were slippers under the bed.

"If Matt was looking for a big adventure, he went about it in a dignified way," Jupiter remarked.

"—Until a shark got in his way." Pete flipped open the glove compartment and peered inside. Quietly he added: "I hope he gets better."

When Pete had finished checking the cab, Bob arrived. Both of them joined Jupiter in checking the drawers and compartments. There was nothing exciting to find here—plastic plates and cups, a toilet bag with shower gel, toothbrush and toothpaste, and two books.

"I read this recently too." Bob held up a thick, bound book with a bookmark inside.

Jupiter reached past him and grabbed the book. "I'm clearly more interested in this copy!"

"Let me guess—a research paper on atoms in space," Pete said without turning to his friend.

“Not at all,” Jupiter replied. “Apparently you didn’t bother to look at the books individually this morning!”

Now Pete turned around after all. “Sorry, I just didn’t feel like reading then.”

Bob glanced at the book. “It would have been worth it!”

“*The Tides*,” Jupiter read aloud, “a thriller by Darren Mitchell-Balton.”

“So this is what Matt meant when he talked about ‘the tides’! Not sea tides, but a book!”

“More likely its contents.” Jupiter had opened the book. All that was left of the pages was a wide margin. The inside had been cut out. In the rectangular cavity, there was a folded brown envelope.

“A hiding compartment in the book,” Jupiter said. “Not new, but still effective again and again. We should—”

“Hide it!” shouted Pete. “Someone’s coming! Out of the van now!”

“Who—” Bob began.

“Tell you later!” Pete interjected. “Get back to my car! Now!”

Jupiter and Bob didn’t hesitate for long. One by one they jumped out of the side door into the open, Pete being the last. He quietly closed the door and hurried after his friends. Bob got into the back seat of the MG, Jupiter into the passenger seat, and finally Pete went behind the wheel.

The Second Investigator’s car was partially shielded by a panel van, but Pete had a view of Matt’s van from the driver’s seat.

“What happened? Who was that?” Bob asked.

“It’s Mr Blond!” Pete whispered. “It looked like he was looking for Matt’s van. I hope he didn’t see us!”

“Mr Blond?” asked Bob.

“A man with very light hair.” Pete explained. “He was following Finley on the beach.”

“The blond man Matt was talking about? How do you know who that is all of a sudden?”

“We’ll be happy to bring you up to date on our investigation, Bob, and hear what you’ve been able to find out in the meantime,” Jupiter said, “but we have to go in the hospital and find Matt.”

“What if Mr Blond shows up there?” Pete objected.

“We have to sneak into the hospital now while he’s outside,” Jupiter decided.

“He saw me today with Finley at the lockers!” Pete said.

“You must have a cap in the car and sunglasses.” Jupiter looked around. Sure enough, there was a baseball cap in the back seat. “You and I will go in and ask for Matt. Bob, meanwhile, stay here in the car and keep an eye on Mr Blond.”

“Is he dangerous?” asked Bob.

“I don’t know,” Pete said. “You better not get in his way!”

The Three Investigators knew Rocky Beach Hospital reasonably well. It was the only hospital in the vicinity. The boys had been here a couple of times. Jupiter and Pete therefore knew exactly where to ask. A friendly woman with dyed red hair informed them that Matt had already been moved from the intensive care unit to a normal room.

“That’s all I’m really allowed to tell you,” she explained, “even though you saved his life.” She gave Pete a broad smile.

The Second Investigator took off his sunglasses and smiled back. As he did so, he held up the van key. “I brought Matt’s backpack here earlier but I forgot to put his van key in it.”

“Hold on.” The woman glanced at her computer, then looked up again. “You can leave the key on the second floor... at the ward to the left of the lift. The nurses’ station is just beyond the entrance.”

“I hope we can talk to Matt,” Jupiter said as they stepped out of the lift a moment later.

“Visiting hours are already over,” Pete said. He stepped towards a glass door that opened automatically.

“Excuse me!” A young man came towards them. He was pushing a cart with cleaning products, to which two rubbish bags were attached. Jupiter looked at the man for a moment, then turned to a nurse who had just stepped into the corridor. She looked tired and listened impatiently to Jupiter while he explained what they were here for.

“Mr Kooning is not receiving visitors,” she said curtly.

“Is that for now, or could we come back a little later?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“He won’t be receiving visitors,” the nurse replied, “not today and not tomorrow either.”

“Can you at least tell us how he is?”

“I’m not allowed to give you any information.”

The nurse was about to turn around when Pete waved the key again. “And what about this?”

She hesitated briefly, then held out her hand. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Nurse!”

The woman turned around, slightly annoyed. A man was standing in the open doorway of a room. “I’ve already rung the bell twice!”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Come immediately!” The man’s voice was harsh. It was obvious that he would brook no argument. The nurse grabbed the van key with a tense expression on her face. “Thanks, guys.”

“I don’t have forever!” The man was still standing in the doorway.

“We’re leaving,” Jupiter decided. Turning to Pete, he added quietly: “—But we’ll be back.”

6. What Happened on 17th August?

“I’m hungry and I want to take a shower!” said Pete emphatically.

“We’re going back to Headquarters,” Jupiter decided.

Just before the two of them exited the main entrance of the hospital, Jupiter took a look at Matt’s van. There did not seem to be anybody there now. In any case, they crept out and headed for Pete’s car. Jupiter opened the passenger door and got into the MG.

“How did it go?” asked Bob.

“Not ideal,” Jupiter replied. “We weren’t allowed to see Matt. What happened out here?”

“The blond guy actually went in and searched the van as we did not lock it. When he was done, he took a few photos from the outside. Then he drove off in a black Cadillac.”

Jupe raised an eyebrow. “Why didn’t you follow him?”

“I came here by bus,” Bob replied, “and I do not have Pete’s car key.”

“Regrettable.” The First Investigator slowly fastened his seat belt. “At least we can now assume that this man actually has something to do with the case.”

“First he stalks Finley on the beach, then he spies on Matt,” Pete said. “Sounds like we have a prime suspect.”

“As it is, we don’t yet know what it’s all about,” Jupiter noted.

“Okay, where to now?” Pete asked.

“I’m hungry,” Jupiter announced. “I can’t think properly when I’m hungry.”

“Okay. We’ll get a snack at Taco Bell and then go straight to Inspector Cotta.” Pete suggested and drove off. “We’ll ask him to protect Finley and have Mr Blond followed.”

“But Matt passed the case on to you, not to the police!” objected Jupiter.

Pete braked in front of a red light. “When he was bitten by the shark, there happened to be no policeman among the surfers.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a round of tacos,” Bob thought. “We’ll eat there and talk about the case in peace. Then we’ll decide whether to go to the police or investigate further ourselves.”

“We also have to open the brown envelope we found hidden in Matt’s book,” Jupiter reminded his friends. “—But we can do that in the restaurant.”

Pete sighed and turned right onto the street where the Taco Bell fast food restaurant was.

After getting a large drink each and waiting for the food to come, Pete yawned. The day had left its mark. The first thing he did was to take a big sip of Coke. Maybe it would keep him awake.

Then Bob asked: “Jupe, are you going to open the envelope now?”

“Patience, Bob,” Jupe said. “I think we should first share with each other what we have found out... but let’s do that after we have eaten.”

Just then, a basket of Mexican fast food was placed in front of each of them. All three hung their thoughts in silence and proceeded to consume the food.

Shortly afterwards, they were done with their meal and Jupe announced: “Now let’s get down to business. Bob... you start...”

Bob wiped his fingers on a napkin and pulled his notepad out of his backpack. “I found what I was looking for pretty quickly on the Internet. Matt attended a prestigious private

school in Michigan and graduated from there a few months ago. He was a member of the tennis team and editor of the yearbook.” Bob looked at his notes. “Also, he’s an only child.”

“That doesn’t get us much further, does it?” Pete took another sip of the Coke.

“Anything can be significant,” Jupiter objected. “What else do you have?”

Bob put a photo on the table that he had printed out from the Internet. It showed a boy with light brown curls. He was wearing a striped shirt and a dark blue sweater. “That’s him, isn’t it?”

Pete looked at the photo. “If you imagine the hair wet and add a bloody bite wound, it could be close. Here he looks more like he’s going to the golf course.”

“As far as I know, he is in the sailing club,” Bob reported.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Pete exclaimed. “How did you even get this kind of information about him? Is he so famous that he could be so easily traced?”

“Never underestimate the power of social media,” Bob explained. “I did not directly get information about him, but the links came by matching his surname with Detroit. That too needed a bit of luck, and I discovered a certain Dr James Lawrence Kooning. From newspaper reports there and a couple of social media postings, I found that he is Matt’s father.”

“Never heard of him,” Pete grumbled. “Do we have to know him?”

“If you are rich and want preferential treatment, yes,” Bob replied. “Dr Kooning is the director of the private Lancaster Clinic—a clinic for the rich and famous. I understand that many Hollywood stars and top athletes are among his patients.”

Pete looked up. “Surfers too?”

“If they can afford it, for sure. Mainly Dr Kooning treats professional football and baseball players,” Bob reported, “and soon there will be a Lancaster clinic in Los Angeles too.” He passed around an article with photos.

“Wait a minute!” Jupiter bristled. “This was the man Pete and I saw earlier at the hospital! He was pressuring the nurse because she didn’t respond quickly enough to his ringing.”

“Aha! So that is Matt’s father...” Pete remarked, “and Matt doesn’t have a very nice father.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions,” Jupiter admonished. “The man has just been with his seriously injured son. It stands to reason that he was emotionally upset. Let’s first note that Matt comes from a wealthy family.”

“The Koonings are guaranteed to be filthy rich.” Bob put his pad down on the table. “Matt’s mother is Janet Lancaster-Kooning. Her father owns the private clinic.”

Jupiter pushed his empty plastic basket aside. “Let’s recap—a rich kid from Michigan is looking for a surfer in Rocky Beach—a surfer he’s never seen before and barely knows anything about.”

“He would have something though,” Bob added. “Just think of the brown envelope from the book.”

“We can check it out now.” Jupiter opened the brown envelope and pulled out a paper with two photos printed on it. “Assuming these are the photos Rubbish-George saw, this is a surfer called Finley. Pete had already been in contact with him. Finley Stenseth is about 16 or 17 years old, and is a student at Green Canyon High School. He works at the harbour and the surf shop from time to time.”

Bob took the photos from Jupiter and looked at them. They showed a dark-haired boy on a surfboard who was riding a wave. The photos had probably been taken with a telephoto lens from the beach.

Pete leaned over to his friend. "Yes, that could very well be Stenseth."

"Is there anything else in the envelope?" asked Bob.

"Yes." Jupiter put a piece of paper on the table. Someone had written notes on it in a messy cursive script.

"A date and a place!" remarked Bob. "Maybe a meeting place?"

"17th August, around 9 pm!" Pete read aloud. "That was over a week ago!"

"It's been over a year," Jupiter corrected. "You missed the year."

Bob tapped the paper. "Coast View Drive, Rocky Beach. That's near the beach. Could it be that the photo was taken from there?"

Pete nodded. "There is a small footpath from the road down to the beach. It would be quite possible from there."

"—But not at 9 pm," Jupiter interjected. "The position of the sun suggests that it was shot in the morning."

Bob leaned forward. "There is another piece of information on the note: 'Finley and Farryn or Farran'."

"The latter is a girl's name of Irish-English origin. Looks like Matt wasn't just looking for a Finley, but a girl—or a woman," Juve said. "Does Finley have a sister?"

"Phew," Pete responded. "I don't know about that. He used to be with an older girl sometimes, but I haven't seen her for ages. I don't know her name, but I remember she was an incredibly good surfer!"

"Perhaps Finley Stenseth can explain to us what these notes mean." Jupiter carefully put the two pieces of paper back in the envelope. "We will see him first thing in the morning about the matter."

Pete ran his hands over his face in exhaustion. "Stenseth and I are not exactly the best of friends. I'm sure he won't want to talk to us. Besides, we don't know where he lives."

"I went to the surf shop right after my visit to Rubbish-George," Jupiter said. "Finley has a vacation job there. He'll be at the shop tomorrow from 10 am to 2 pm... and as for the talking, you can just leave it to me."

"So we're not going to the police then?" Bob wanted to know.

"It's our case," Jupiter stated. With that, the matter was decided.

7. Tired Investigators

“Jupiter Jones!” Aunt Mathilda stood in the entrance to Jupiter’s outdoor workshop and looked sternly at her nephew. “What are you up to now?”

The First Investigator looked up from his work. He was sitting at the workbench in the glow of a dented lamp and had set up an old sewing machine in front of him. It was one that still had to be operated with a foot pedal, but it worked perfectly.

“I have some sewing to do,” Jupiter explained. “I borrowed this sewing machine from Uncle Titus.”

“Sewing?” Aunt Mathilda raised her eyebrows questioningly. “You? At this time of the night?”

“It’s urgent,” Jupiter said.

“As urgent as the dirty popcorn machine?” asked Aunt Mathilda. “—Or the filthy portable toilet?”

Jupiter slumped down. “I’ll take care of both of them first thing tomorrow! I promise. It’s already too dark now.”

“Too dark? Your uncle also happened to have two construction spotlights.”

“Aunt Mathilda!” Jupiter shifted to a pitying tone. “It’s already after nine o’clock! There should be a law that prohibits working so late at—”

“In this salvage yard, I am the law!” Aunt Mathilda said. “I need to have the portable toilet cleaned right now. You know why? A building developer called this afternoon and wanted to buy it. He’s coming tomorrow morning. I can’t sell him that filthy thing. I gave you the chance to clean it earlier but you didn’t, so I need you to do it right now!”

Aunt Mathilda held out a bucket to him. In it was a cleaning agent, gloves and a rag. “Get to work.”

Then Aunt Mathilda saw the blue shirt onto which Jupiter was sewing a dark strip of fabric. “Not bad at all!” she admitted. “However, the machine isn’t set quite right.”

Jupiter sighed. “I need it by tomorrow.”

“With two dark blue stripes on both sleeves?” asked Aunt Mathilda. She grabbed the piece of paper on which Jupiter had made a sketch. From memory, he had drawn out a uniform—with all the details. “That should be manageable. You grab the bucket now and start your chores and I’ll finish the shirt!”

“Thank you!” Jupe jumped up. His aunt would get the sewing done in no time. That left him with the unpleasant task of cleaning the portable toilet.

The blood seeped onto the stones and ran into the water. Pete knelt in a red puddle. “Hold on!” he said to the pale boy.

“I’m dying!” said Matt. His voice was backed with an eerie echo. Pete pressed his towel to the wound, but then realized that Matt was also bleeding from both legs and arms... and now on his head as well.

“I need more towels!” Pete shouted, but no one seemed to have heard him. The Second Investigator sat up. It was dark! His hands groped for a towel. Was that even a towel?

Only slowly did he come back to reality. He was in his room. The luminous digits of his alarm clock read 02:30. He breathed a sigh of relief. It had only been a dream.

The Second Investigator let himself sink back and immediately fell asleep. However, the experiences of the day haunted him again.

The shark attacked repeatedly, and Pete failed to save the victim. Whatever he did, someone ended up lying on the beach covered in blood. First it was Matt, then Jeffrey, then Kelly and finally Finley.

When the alarm clock rang, Pete was downright grateful. He thoughtfully brushed his teeth, got dressed and shuffled into the kitchen.

"Where has your usual energy gone?" asked his mother. She put a freshly baked pancake on Pete's plate.

"It has to build up first," he muttered.

Mrs Crenshaw pushed the maple syrup towards him. "Are you all right?"

"Sure! Thanks, Mum."

Pete hadn't told his parents about the shark attack. They would only worry unnecessarily if he did. That was true of most things The Three Investigators experienced. It was better if parents, uncles and aunts didn't find out about it.

While eating, Pete tried to sort out some of the chaos in his head and shake off the images of the dream. Matt had been bitten by a shark, but he had survived and was now safely in hospital. For that, he had assigned The Three Investigators to look into a case they knew far too little about—a case that probably had something to do with the blond man.

Then there's Finley. He was also in danger. Pete remembered the note from the brown envelope. The date of 17th August also had something to do with the case, along with Coast View Drive and a person called Farryn or Farran.

Pete rubbed his temples. At least he didn't have to sort through this tangle of information alone. Maybe Jupiter had had one of his famous flashes of inspiration by now and was just waiting to present the solution of the mystery to his friends.

"You look tired!" Bob told Pete when The Three Investigators met in the outdoor workshop at the salvage yard. They wanted to talk briefly and then ride their bikes to the harbour together.

"I didn't sleep well," Pete admitted, "and Jupe doesn't look like pure sunshine either."

The First Investigator held up a pair of rubber gloves. "I've been cleaning the filthy portable toilet for two hours last night! Talk about the smell! Frankly, I personally resent Uncle Titus's choice of his latest purchases."

"Did you at least have a hunch about how to solve our case while you were at it?" Bob asked.

Jupiter scowled at his friend. "No, I was too busy not breathing through my nose."

"I'm sure Aunt Mathilda will compensate you with a cherry pie," Bob said encouragingly.

"I'm not sure." Jupiter dropped his gloves into a cleaning bucket. "I still have to clean the popcorn machine... but she did sew something for me last night."

Bob grinned. "Well, at least you didn't have to do that yourself."

"I could certainly have done it myself if duty hadn't called!" replied Jupiter.

He flipped open a cardboard box and took out the blue shirt. In the meantime, he had also made a matching badge and attached it to the pocket of the shirt. "Add to that blue cloth trousers, a grey bucket and a mop—and you have a cleaning specialist."

Pete stumbled. "Are you supposed to wear that now while working in the salvage yard?"

"The lack of sleep is really noticeable in you, Pete." Jupiter looked at the shirt with satisfaction. "This is my uniform for an undercover mission! As visitors, we can't get past the hospital staff, but if I appear as part of the staff, things might be different."

"You want to talk to Matt," Bob concluded.

Jupiter looked at his watch. "—As soon as possible. I'd need a car for that too."

"You can take my Beetle," Bob offered spontaneously.

"What about the surf shop?" Pete wanted to know. "You said you were going to talk to Finley."

"I'll give you the task," Jupiter said. "I'd say you get right on your bikes and go there. They open in ten minutes!"

8. Liquid Teal

The surf shop was in a one-storey building at the harbour. Above the door hung a sign in the shape of a surfboard with the words 'Liquid Teal' in blue-green letters.

"Jupe should have come with us after all," Pete said as they entered. "He knows the owners."

Jupiter Jones didn't cut a particularly good figure on a surfboard, but his uncle Titus got along great with the owners of Liquid Teal—two cousins who had turned their enthusiasm for surfing into a profession.

They had built their first shop and small surfboard workshop mostly with materials from the salvage yard. That had been many years ago. In the meantime, the boards had become extremely popular and production took place somewhere outside of Rocky Beach. What remained was the shop at the harbour. Only surfboards of their own brand were sold there. However, wetsuits and accessories from other manufacturers were also available.

"Awesome!" said Pete as he marvelled at the colourful surfboards.

"Nicely done," Bob also admitted.

"Nicely?" Pete laughed out. "Liquid Teal has a perfect design, and the boards are supposed to be great—especially the shortboards!"

"The longboards are top-notch too." Finley Stenseth stepped out from behind a shelf of swimwear. "Want to get rid of your pocket money, Crenshaw?"

"We are not here as customers," Pete clarified.

Finley slowly approached, not giving Bob a glance. "Let me guess—you're here on behalf of your little investigation club—the Super Heroes of Rocky Beach." He looked Pete straight in the eye without blinking.

Pete withstood the gaze, although it made him uncomfortable. "Right," he said, "and we have a few questions for you."

"I only talk to customers," Finley explained. He still did not take his eyes off the Second Investigator.

Pete stepped uneasily from one leg to the other.

"We need wax." Bob had looked around and spotted a tray of colourful metal tins. Unlike the boards and the wetsuits, they were among the items that were affordable. Prices ranged from 99 cents to a few dollars. The wax was used to rub onto the surface of the boards to give the surfers a better footing.

"Wax?" Finley gave a snorting laugh. "Are you hoping to get some information for a few bucks?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "That remains to be seen. Anyway, we're customers now."

"So that's settled. Let's get to the important stuff!" Pete held out the slip of paper with the handwritten notes to Finley. "What does this tell you?"

Finley pressed his lips together and took a step back.

"What happened last year on 17th August at Coast View Drive?" Bob asked.

"Nothing." Finley took a can of wax from the tray and carried it to the counter at the back of the shop where the cash register was. "That'll be \$1.99."

“Maybe we should talk to Farryn or Farran,” Bob said calmly as he handed Finley the money. “I’m sure she’ll be able to tell us more about it.”

“How about you just leave me alone?” Finley glared angrily at Bob.

“We want to help you,” Pete relented.

“Help?” Finley laughed out. “You’re bored because basketball is on summer break and your surfing buddy Jeffrey is out of town. So grab one of your boards, get out on the water and work on your tricks.”

“We are investigators,” Pete said emphatically, “and we take this seriously!”

“And I’m a surfer and I take this seriously too,” Finley countered. “Do a decent hang five first, then we’ll talk.”

Now Pete looked angry. “I’ll put a clean hang ten on it!”

“Hey!” Bob slapped the piece of paper with the notes vigorously on the counter. “Matt’s found something! It’s connected to this date and this place and you, Finley! There’s still another person. Maybe you’re both in danger soon! Go ahead and keep talking surf tricks.”

The sound of an engine was heard in front of the shop. Through the shop window, they could see a van that was just parking.

“New goods,” Finley said. “I have to take care of that.”

“We’re going to look around the shop a bit more,” Bob said as the dark-haired boy walked past them with hurried steps.

“Is he always in such a bad mood?” Bob whispered to Pete as the shop door slammed shut behind Finley.

“I would say it’s normal for him,” Pete replied, “but no one here can beat him on the longboard... and he’s pretty good on the shortboard too.”

Bob peered between the displays in the shop window. “He’s talking to a guy.”

Pete stepped up to his friend. Sure enough, Finley was standing outside by a van with the Liquid Teal logo on its side. He was talking to a man who was tanned, well-toned, and looked to be in his early twenties.

“That man must be from the surfboard workshop,” Pete said. “We’ll take advantage of the situation! You watch Finley and I’ll go through his things. Maybe I’ll find out his address!”

He didn’t even wait for an answer, but circled the counter. There was a bin, a pad, pens, discarded goods, price tags, but neither a bag nor a backpack.

Hastily, Pete looked around. Behind a rack of surfboards were two doors. It was quite possible that Finley was not alone in the shop, but he had to take the risk. If need be, he could always come up with an excuse.

Behind the first door was a small washroom. Behind the second door was an office. There was a desk with a computer and printer, a shelf with files and a closed cupboard.

“Bingo!” said Pete quietly. In front of the cupboard, he had spotted Finley’s battered backpack. The Second Investigator unzipped it and peered inside.

Finley didn’t have much in it. Just an old mobile phone, a half-empty bottle of Coke and a wallet. That was all Pete needed. A driver’s licence or ID card would be enough for him. Then he would know where Finley lived and could find out more about him, for example, whether he had a sister.

Pete searched the wallet. He found five dollars and a few cents in it. Finley was also carrying a card from the Rocky Beach Public Library. Next to it was a student ID from Green Canyon High School. Pete pulled it out of the wallet.

The driver of the van poked Finley rudely on the chest with his index finger. Unfortunately, Bob could not hear what he was saying. It was obvious, however, that the two had problems with each other.

Finley muttered something. The brown-haired man nodded. Then he looked towards the shop. Bob instinctively took a step back and pretended to be interested in a wetsuit, but the man had definitely seen Bob watching him. It was a rookie mistake! Now he couldn't possibly continue to stand around the shop window.

Disgruntled, Bob pushed the suits back and forth on the rack. Somehow he had the feeling that he had seen that brown-haired man before... but he just couldn't remember where or when.

Hiding behind a mannequin, Bob peered out again at the van. The guy had just opened the van's back door and got into the cargo area. Bob could see several surfboards tied to racks. Finley helped the man unstrap the boards.

Meanwhile, an elderly man in glasses and a colourful Hawaiian shirt stepped up to the van. He briefly waved to the brown-haired man, turned and then came into the shop. He stumbled for a moment when he saw Bob. "Can I help you?"

"No, thank you, sir," Bob replied kindly. "I've already bought something from your colleague and just wanted to have a look around."

"Well then, get in touch if you do want to know something." The man headed for the back of the shop, more precisely, the door behind which Pete had gone to look for Finley's things. Bob had to stop him!

"Wait!" Bob called out and put on a smile. "I really do have one question!"

"Shoot!" The man turned to face Bob.

Bob, however, hardly relaxed. He had to distract the elderly man long enough and hope that Pete had heard that there was someone else in the shop. After all, he shouldn't be seen coming out of the back room now.

"Uh... I'm just starting out surfing and I don't know if I should get a longboard or a shortboard," Bob began. "Honestly, with the huge selection, I don't know at all what is suitable for me."

The man in the Hawaiian shirt beamed. "That's not a problem. I'm an expert on that!" What followed was an enthusiastic lecture about all the different boards used in surfing. After a few minutes, the door opened and Finley carried in a board.

"The new goods to the back left, please!" the man called out to him.

"Yes, Mr Tealson!" Finley said as he looked sceptically over at Bob. Then he looked around searchingly for Pete. The shop was cluttered. Surfboards, clothes racks and shelves ensured that one could not see into all corners. This was an advantage for the investigators.

"That's a good beginner's board!" Mr Tealson pointed to a medium-sized surfboard in bright yellow.

"I see." Bob leaned forward with feigned interest.

At the same moment, Pete peered cautiously through the door.

9. Jupiter in Disguise

“Great!” exclaimed Bob. “Can I have a closer look?”

Luckily, Mr Tealson had his back to Pete. There was no way he could turn around now! Bob quickly glanced over at Finley, who was just putting down the new surfboard. He was busy. The Second Investigator ducked and disappeared unseen behind the counter.

“We at Liquid Teal attach great importance to high-quality material,” Mr Tealson explained. Bob nodded without really listening. “We want our boards to withstand even the highest strains.”

“Where is Crenshaw?” Finley suddenly asked.

“What?” Bob pretended not to hear the question.

“Crenshaw!” repeated Finley. “Have you got tomatoes in your ears or are you pests plotting something?”

Mr Tealson looked at the boy in surprise. “Is that how you talk to a customer?”

“Sorry, sir,” Finley said quickly.

“I think I finally found a great T-shirt!” With these words Pete stepped out of one of the changing rooms.

Bob breathed a sigh of relief. So the Second Investigator had sneaked into a changing room unnoticed and was now pretending to have been trying on T-shirts all along. In fact, he was holding two in his arms. “Blue or grey?”

“Blue!” said Bob, giving a thumbs up.

Finley went to the cash register and accepted the item. “That’ll be \$38.50.”

The Second Investigator gulped briefly, but then pulled out his bank card.

“90% nylon, 10% elastane—machine washable, but not suitable for tumble drying,” Finley reeled off. Then he glanced at the label and laughed contemptuously. “Size S? I bet that fits you great.”

“I like it tight fitting,” Pete lied.

“You’ll surf belly up in this thing.” Finley put the T-shirt in a colourful paper bag.

“Thank you.” Pete grabbed the bag. “See you at the beach.”

Finley nodded curtly. “Yes, unfortunately.”

Jupiter had planned the cleaning job precisely. His phenomenal memory had been very helpful. The First Investigator noticed things that other people often did not... and he memorized everything very precisely. He could close his eyes and describe the uniform of the cleaners in detail—the pinned ID, the light blue shirt with the dark blue stripes on the half-length sleeves, the blue trousers and the blue rubber shoes.

For this, he had checked on how the hospital’s cleaning was organized. He knew that there was a large team that was deployed on all the wards and worked in shifts. The hospital staff certainly knew many of the cleaners, but it was not unusual for a new face to appear.

It was important, however, that the nurse from the day before did not recognize him, but Jupiter had prepared for that too. As a small child, he had acted in a television series, and even though he had long since turned his back on the acting business, he still liked to slip into new roles.

Today he put on a pair of glasses with wide, black frames. They not only changed his appearance but made him look a little older. In uniform, he could definitely pass for an adult. He combed his thick black hair into a neat side parting and put on his blue shirt. It fit perfectly. Jupiter had found the matching trousers in a box of old sports clothes at the salvage yard. They no longer looked brand new, but at least they had been washed. He had even found a cart for the rubbish bags. With that, he was as good as ready to go.

On the way to the hospital, he stopped at a discount store. There were cheap rubber gloves and plastic buckets in all colours. Next to a bargain table with fabric unicorns and lunch boxes, there was a display of footwear. The right shade of blue wasn't there, but at least there were shoes that at least looked similar to those worn by the cleaners. They were a size too big, nevertheless, the First Investigator was satisfied. For a couple of dollars, he had put together a complete outfit that also looked deceptively real. Now he just had to be a convincing cleaner and work his way to Matt's room.

He parked the Beetle in the visitors' car park, but then took the back entrance into the hospital. On the second floor, he headed for the toilets. There he filled water into his bucket. Now he was ready to go! He took a deep breath, and then made his way to the ward.

"Did you find anything?" Bob was standing next to Pete a distance away outside the surf shop. The Liquid Teal van was just leaving.

"A student card with an address," Pete reported. The search had been successful. Nevertheless, his mood was not good. He had just bought a far too expensive T-shirt in a far too small size.

"Did you take down the address?" Bob looked at the Second Investigator.

"Uh, nope," Pete admitted. "I took a photo of it with my phone. It was just in time because I heard you talking to the salesman. Then I had to figure out how to get out of the office."

Pete tapped on his phone and showed Bob the photo he took of Finley's card. It was in various shades of green. A black and white photo showed Finley's face. Next to it was his student number and the school address. On the back were other details, including Finley's address and date of birth.

"17th August is not his birthday," Pete noted, "and he doesn't live in Seven Pines."

"Why should he?" asked Bob.

"Because he took the bus in that direction yesterday," Pete explained.

"His address is 189 Las Tunas Street," Bob read out, "here in Rocky Beach."

"Quite a long road. Number 189 should be somewhere in the southeast, at the foot of the mountains," Pete remarked.

"That's right," Bob confirmed. "I just wonder why Finley doesn't go to our school."

"I certainly won't ask him that," Pete said.

"Maybe we can talk to someone in Finley's family," Bob suggested. "He's busy at the shop right now. We could take a leisurely drive to Las Tunas Street and ring the bell at Number 189."

"Hmm..." Pete made indecisively. "If Finley is really in danger, we'd better not let him out of our sight."

"I agree with you there," Bob said. "Do you want to take on the task?"

"Get on with the work!" the nurse said. She wrinkled her nose.

Jupiter looked at the bathroom. The lid of the toilet was flipped up. Yellow puddles on the white floor tiles reflected the light from the ceiling lamp. Used paper towels lay crumpled beside and under the sink, and two well-worn slippers stood in the shower. Jupiter groaned.

"We are all happy when the patient is discharged," the nurse said quietly, "but there are worse things. You're new to the team, aren't you?"

"Yes." Jupe nodded.

"Wait till they send you to the operating rooms. That is not for the faint-hearted!"

"Anyway, this would keep me occupied for a while," Jupe said.

He had been so close! Matt was just one room away. A moment ago, he was making his way there but the nurse had hauled him into this room next door.

Grumbling, Jupiter put on his gloves. What had he actually done to deserve so much disgusting filth? With every passing minute, his respect for the people who did this every day increased. He fervently hoped that no one would think of sending him in the operation rooms.

When he was done, he hurried straight to the next room. He knocked on the door where Dr Kooning had stood and called for the nurse yesterday.

"Come in," someone called out. It sounded muffled. Jupiter pressed the handle and pushed his cart into the room, along with his scrubbing brush. It was a single room. A boy was lying on the bed. His pale face looked very tired and his eyes were lined with dark shadows. He was alone.

"Matt?" Jupiter took off his glasses.

The boy looked at him in amazement. The First Investigator had expected that. Just in case, he had pocketed the newspaper article with the photo of The Three Investigators to get Matt's attention. "I'm Jupiter Jones."

"From The Three Investigators!" Matt sat up with difficulty. As he did so, he screwed up his face.

"Lie still!" admonished Jupiter. "How are you?"

"As good as can be expected under the circumstances. I was very lucky."

"Indeed." Jupiter stepped closer to the bed. "You spoke to my colleague Pete Crenshaw yesterday and put him on a case."

"Pete saved my life!" said Matt gratefully. "I should have asked you guys for help earlier, but I really wanted to make it on my own. That's why I went surfing in the first place. I wanted to approach Finley as inconspicuously as possible. As you can see, that didn't work."

"Finley wasn't at the beach yesterday morning, but a shark was," Jupiter summarized. "You might be pleased to hear that we've taken the case. Pete and Bob are looking after Finley right now."

"You found him?"

"I strongly believe that we have been able to identify the Finley you are looking for," confirmed the First Investigator, "but we still lack the background to the case."

"I overheard a conversation," Matt blurted out. "That's what started it all. It was..." He paused to think. "It was three or four days ago... in Los Angeles. My father has an apartment there because he's often in the area on business. My mother was shopping in Beverly Hills and my father wanted to make some phone calls. I had planned to visit a movie studio in Hollywood for the day, but on the way, I realized that I had forgotten my camera. I have a pretty good SLR camera and I'm big on quality when it comes to photos."

"Understandable," Jupe said. He was starting to get a little nervous. Matt was taking his story a long way. On the one hand, every little detail could be significant, but on the other hand, a hospital staff member could come in at any time... or someone from Matt's family!

“So I went back to the apartment,” Matt continued. “Of course I didn’t want to disturb my father. I know how important his work is to him. So I quietly went to my room and got the camera. Then in the hallway, I heard that someone was with my father—in his room. Dad was very excited. At first I thought he was arguing with the man, but it wasn’t an argument... and it wasn’t about the clinic either.”

“What then?”

“I don’t know! I was about to leave when suddenly the other man said: ‘I’ll deal with Finley and shut him up.’ No, wait...” Matt looked strained. “He put it a little differently.”

“How?”

“More like: ‘I’ll get rid of him!’”

“That sounds like murderous intent!” Jupiter stated.

“Yes, it sounded threatening,” Matt said. “My dad then said: ‘Handle this discreetly. I’ll keep the copies of these photos’—something like that, anyway.”

“Something like that?” echoed Jupiter. His tension increased. He himself would have memorized every single word of the conversation, but Matt did not seem to pay attention to detail. The First Investigator had to work with questions that were as concrete as possible. “What did that man look like?”

“Unfortunately, I only saw him from behind when he left the apartment. I hid in the guest bathroom and peeked through the gap in the door. He had extremely light hair—almost like an albino, but I guess he used—”

“—A hair-lightening agent,” Jupe finished the sentence.

“Right,” Matt agreed. “It hasn’t been fashionable for a long time, but some people still think it makes them look chic.”

Jupiter nervously ran his fingers through his hair, bringing it back into its usual disarray. “Matt, do you have any other evidence that your father is involved in criminal activities?”

“No, and it’s precisely this uncertainty that gets me down.” His face took on a pained expression. “My father is not only a doctor, but also a businessman. When it comes to the clinic, he can be tough. However, I wonder all the time whether he... well, whether he would be... capable... I mean...”

“You wonder if he would put a human life at risk?” Jupiter cautiously asked.

Matt looked down at the bedspread in silence. Then he nodded slowly.

10. Las Tunas Street

“So you started checking on your father?” asked Jupiter.

“That sounds awful, doesn’t it?” replied Matt, concerned. “Somehow I had to do it.”

Jupiter quickly went through the most important questions in his head. He had to understand what happened after Matt overheard the conversation.

“The blond man is definitely after Finley!” Matt interrupted Jupiter’s thoughts. “I heard it myself! And then—”

The door opened. “Good news!”

“Mum!”

Accompanied by a cloud of perfume, a nobly dressed lady rushed into the room. She gave Jupiter an annoyed look. He immediately began to mop the floor.

“You can do that later!” the woman ordered. “I want to talk to my son in peace!”

“Very well, ma’am,” Jupiter said mechanically and pushed his little cart towards the door.

“The doctor says you can be transferred tomorrow!” he heard Mrs Kooning say. “Then you’ll finally be in a better hospital!”

Disgruntled, Jupiter stepped into the corridor. There were still so many unanswered questions and now Matt was going to be transferred to another hospital! Lost in thought, he rubbed the spot on his shoulder where Rubbish-George had caught him the day before.

“Hey, what are you doing?” A man in a blue uniform came towards him. He was pushing a cart with two rubbish bags, a mop and a bucket. It was a real employee of the cleaning team!

“I... uh... am new here and probably in the wrong ward.” Jupiter turned and headed for the two glass doors at the end of the corridor with quick steps.

“Watch out!” the cleaner called after him. “The floor is—”

Too late. Jupiter had already started to slip violently in his much too large rubber shoes.

“—Freshly mopped!” the man finished his sentence.

By then Jupiter had already fell flat on the floor. His cart rolled another metre and then crashed into a wall.

“Geez, kid!” The cleaner stepped up next to the First Investigator. “Are you all right?”

“What’s going on?” A nurse came up to the two. Jupiter recognized her. It was the nurse, of all people, who had not let him and Pete see Matt the day before.

“Everything’s okay. Really!” Jupiter assured the cleaner, who was helping him up. “I was just in the wrong ward and—”

“Your ID?” the man asked sceptically.

“What’s going on here?” the nurse asked sternly.

“This boy is not with us,” the cleaner said.

“I... uh...” Jupiter searched desperately for a good explanation. He had designed the identity card from memory on the computer and printed it out. It certainly looked similar to the real thing, but when compared directly, the fake was easy to spot.

“Hold him!” the nurse said to the cleaner. “I’ll call the police!”

“Las Tunas Street Station—end of the line,” the bus driver’s voice rang out. The doors hissed and Bob stepped out into the open.

He saw paved front gardens, withered oleander bushes, simple houses, a car repair shop and a flat warehouse. Las Tunas Street was certainly not one of the prettiest streets in Rocky Beach, but there was a good view of the coastal mountain range.

House Number 189 was just a few steps from the bus stop. Bob opened the gate in a wire fence. The one-storey wooden house was painted beige. On the porch were old cardboard boxes, a broken bathroom cabinet, a bucket, a few empty metal bowls and a tub with an aloe vera plant.

As Bob rang the bell, something touched his leg. Startled, he took a step to the side. A brown cat looked up at him.

“Hi,” Bob said, feeling a little silly at the same moment.

“Coming!” a strong voice boomed out from inside the house.

Then the door was flung open. The cat leapt into the hallway in one bound, past a woman with short purple hair. She wore a loose black T-shirt with ‘No Parking’ printed on it, along with grey-patterned leggings and glasses that resembled her hair in hue.

“About time ‘April’ showed her face again,” she said instead of a greeting.

“Good afternoon!” Bob smiled kindly. “Is Finley home?”

“He’s at work.”

“Too bad,” Bob said. “I must have got the time wrong.”

“Happens.” The woman shrugged her shoulders. She made an effort to close the door.

Bob, however, was not so easily dissuaded. “You know, I’m from the school newspaper at Rocky Beach High. We start right after the holidays with an issue about surfing. We have to write a feature about Finley... even though he’s in another school, unfortunately.”

“Don’t you have your own surfers?” the woman asked. Something hissed in the hallway. The woman turned around. “Hey, ‘March’, keep the noise down! ‘July’, get out! Shoo!”

Bob wondered how many cats lived in the house altogether. It might have to stop at twelve when the woman ran out of names.

“Finley is an exceptional talent,” Bob explained, “but surely you know that. He is a great role model for many students.”

“My grandson is a role model?” the woman wondered.

“So you’re his grandmother?”

The woman laughed hoarsely. “Who else? His sister?”

“Uh...” Bob muttered, because he couldn’t think of a witty answer off the top of his head.

“What exactly do you want?”

“I have to hand in my article tomorrow,” Bob urged. “The newspaper is supposed to be published on the first day of school. I already talked to Finley the day before yesterday and took a few photos, but now I have a few more questions.”

“We had a burst pipe last week,” Finley’s grandmother said completely out of context.

“I’m very sorry about that.”

“Nasty business! At least I was able to save the carpet. It’s in the backyard and now it has to go back into the house. You can help me with it.”

“Of course!” said Bob.

“Then come!”

Bob followed the woman through a narrow hallway where there were three cat baskets. Photographs hung on the walls. In passing, Bob could make out a few shots of Finley. In addition, a girl with long dark hair kept appearing.

Before he could take a closer look at the photos, Finley's grandmother opened a door. Behind it was a small living room with an oversized television. Two more cats were lying on a sofa.

"Actually, I only have four left," Finley's grandmother explained as she opened the door to the backyard. "—But the neighbours take such bad care of their critters, they all come here. So, there it is..." She pointed to a green and brown patterned rug hung over a half-height wall.

Instead of a garden with a lawn, the Stenseth family had a small sandy area where a few cacti and dry shrubs grew. In the far corner were small metal crosses.

Bob must have made a surprised face, because Finley's grandmother sighed. "My pet cemetery. It's not very nice, but at least they won't be forgotten. Now, let's get to work!"

Bob eyed Finley's grandmother. The woman's manner reminded him somewhat of Aunt Mathilda, who ran her strict but warm regiment in the salvage yard. However, it was far less bleak there. Besides the junk, the dust and the scrap, there were also planted flower tubs, fragrant cherry pie and the cosy verandah of the Jones family home. The Stenseth home, on the other hand, smelled of cats and cheap cleaning products.

"Do Finley's parents live here too?" asked Bob cautiously as he stood next to the carpet.

"Not really," came the reply. "My son is a truck driver. He lives in his truck most of the time. That's why the kids moved to Rocky Beach. I have enough room in the house and apart from the cats, a few more people don't matter."

"And Finley's mother?"

"She's gone back to her island." Mrs Stenseth grabbed the carpet. "We have to roll it first or we won't get it through the door."

"Which island then?" Bob took one end of the rug and began to roll it. It was full of cat hair. "Hawaii?"

"What makes you think of that? Because my grandchildren can surf?" asked Finley's grandmother. "—Or because they both have such beautiful brown eyes?"

Bob rolled up the carpet further. "Surfing is the right cue."

"You thought wrong, I'm afraid. My son's ex is from Ireland, and that's where she went back to... but she could surf. The children actually got that from her."

"Finley's not the only surfer in the family then?"

"Farryn is the other culprit." Mrs Stenseth laughed hoarsely. "—Or rather, was. Anyway, she hardly has any time besides work. She sits at the register at Paradiso Supermarket until the afternoon, then her shift starts at Bud's Health Food. She's a waitress there."

So Farryn was indeed Finley's sister! Bob felt he had taken a big step forward. He helped Grandma Stenseth carry the carpet into the house and unroll it.

In the process, he learned that after moving to Rocky Beach, Finley had opted to stay at his old school because Green Canyon High had an excellent reputation. When he wasn't at a job or surfing, he was working hard for a college scholarship.

"So he'll either get signed as a pro surfer or go to college. In any case, something will come of the boy!" stated the lady with satisfaction. "Put that in your article!"

"I will!" Bob said goodbye and made his way to the bus stop.

After a few steps he stopped. Paradiso Supermarket was only two streets away. There was no harm in talking to Farryn. After all, her name came up in Matt's notes.

Bob was about to make his way to the shop when a dark shadow fell on him. Someone had come up diagonally behind him.

"You're one of those snoopers!"

Bob looked to the side, startled. He recognized the young man immediately. It was the driver of the Liquid Teal van.

Now, up close, Bob could finally identify him. Until a few months ago, the man had had long hair. That's why Bob hadn't immediately recognized who he was. The guy had worked with Skinny Norris from time to time.

Skinny was, in a way, the arch-enemy of The Three Investigators. He was always getting involved in shady deals and was not afraid to break the law for his own purposes. The people he surrounded himself with did not have the best reputation.

"You're a friend of Skinny Norris," Bob noted.

"Skinny and I go into business from time to time," the young man said, "but that's none of your concern, understand?"

"What do you want from me?" asked Bob.

"We want you to stay out of this!" The man turned around. Only now did Bob spot two other guys leaning against a lowered car. "My buddies and I don't like people spying on us!"

"Spying on you?" asked Bob. He tried hard to make his voice sound calm. Inside, he was anything but calm. The guys looked like they were just waiting to strike.

"You were watching me at Liquid Teal."

"I went there for advice," Bob defended himself, "about a surfboard... The salesman will be happy to confirm that."

"That's the boss you were talking to," the man growled. "You spied on me while I was with Stenseth and now you suddenly turn up in our street? That's no coincidence!"

"I promised Finley I'd take something to his grandmother," Bob lied. "Now I have to go."

The young man grabbed him roughly by the shoulder. "Blatant lie!"

Bob took a step back, then another, but the man did not let up. "If you show your face here or at the surf shop again, you'll have a bad time... and your friends too. Do we understand each other?"

The other two men slowly approached. Bob nodded, but apparently that was not enough.

"Do we understand each other?" the man now repeated much louder.

"Yes!" said Bob emphatically.

"Very nice!" A thin smile played around the corners of the man's mouth. "Then all I have to do now is to make sure you don't forget your promise!"

11. Three Encounters of the Third Kind

Bob tasted blood. His head was buzzing. Carefully, he palpated his face with his right hand. Fortunately, his nose was not broken. Nevertheless, it hurt.

Bob quickly took out his handkerchief and pressed it against his nose in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

“Next time I’ll be less considerate!” the guy growled.

“Dylan!” one of the other men shouted. “Someone’s coming!” He pointed somewhere behind Bob.

“I have to go. Work is calling!” The brown-haired guy called Dylan got into the lowered car along with his buddies. The engine was started, then they drove off.

“Are you all right?” a male voice asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Bob mumbled dazedly. The adrenaline in his blood was only slowly dissipating. When he saw the man who was now standing next to him, a new surge shot through his body.

The man was wearing an aubergine-coloured shirt under a leather jacket. He also wore black jeans and blue cowboy boots. In stark contrast to his eyebrows, his hair was unusually light.

It was Mr Blond! This was the man who had watched Finley at the beach, whom Pete had later seen in the car park at Rocky Beach Hospital and whom Bob himself had seen searching inside Matt’s van. Whoever he was, he made Bob uncomfortable—something about the man seemed unsettling.

“Who were those guys?” the man asked.

“Uh... I owed them a few dollars,” Bob lied. “The matter is now settled.”

“You should cool your nose,” the blond man recommended.

“Will do.”

The man looked Bob up and down once more, nodded at him and then headed for the gate to House Number 189.

Bob strolled slowly along, turned around cautiously after a few metres, and ducked behind a low wall. From there, he could see the man ring Finley’s doorbell. The door opened and Finley’s grandmother appeared. She exchanged a few words with Mr Blond but did not let him into the house. He wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to the woman.

After two or three minutes, the man left the house. When Bob saw that Mr Blond was heading in his direction, he walked briskly to the bus stop across the street where he pretended to study the notice board. Only when Mr Blond had driven away in his black Cadillac did he reach for his mobile phone.

“You’re spying on me.” Finley Stenseth stood up in front of Pete, who was sitting on a bench near the harbour basin.

“What if it is?”

“I’ll just ignore you then,” Finley replied. “Have fun sitting around. I have to work for quite a while.”

“And after that you go surfing?”

“So what?” Finley replied.

“Then I’ll come with you!”

“You’re an annoying brat, Crenshaw.”

“We have a deal,” Pete replied. “I’ll show you a perfect hang ten and you tell me what 17th August is all about.”

“You misunderstood something. That wasn’t a deal, Crenshaw.”

“It is for me!” said Pete. At that moment, his mobile phone rang.

Finley turned without a word and disappeared back into the shop. Pete pulled out the phone and looked at the display. It was Bob.

“Hi, Bob,” Pete answered the call. “Everything all right?”

“No,” came the reply. “I’m in Las Tunas Street and I’ve had three encounters of the third kind here at once.”

“Well, you’re Bob!”

“Ha! Ha!” Bob laughed sarcastically. “I don’t feel like laughing at all right now. That guy who was talking to Finley by the van earlier is a nasty thug! He doesn’t want us to investigate any further. I’ve had the pleasure of meeting his fist.”

“Ouch!” Pete gasped. “How are you?”

“Mediocre,” Bob admitted. “My nose doesn’t seem to be broken and it’s stopped bleeding, but my head is still throbbing.”

“Does Juve know yet?”

“I’d rather not call him,” Bob said. “After all, he’s undercover—just in case I catch him at a wrong moment. I’ll text him in a minute, but first, back to what I really wanted to tell you.”

“That’s right, you did talk about three encounters of the third kind.”

“Yes, it was still quite nice at Grandma Stenseth’s. She just has a bit too many cats... and then there was a blond man around here—in a leather jacket and cowboy boots.”

“Finley’s pursuer!” shouted Pete.

“He also rang the bell at the Stenseth house!”

“Then I’d better warn Finley.”

“We’ll do that together,” Bob said. “I’ll come to the harbour.”

“I’ve really had enough!” Inspector Cotta led Jupiter to his car.

“I had to speak to Matt Kooning!” the First Investigator declared emphatically. “The nurse wouldn’t let me through!”

Inspector Cotta opened the car door with a flourish. “So you thought you’d make up a fake ID and sneak into the room?”

“We’re in the middle of a case!”

“So was I!” the inspector rumbled. “Then the hospital called and told me to collect a Jupiter Jones there.”

“I’m sorry... honest!” Jupiter admitted contritely. The thing at the hospital had gone anything but well. At least Matt’s mother hadn’t got wind of it. Besides, the First Investigator had been able to persuade the nurse to ask for Inspector Cotta.

“You’re coming to the police department now!”

“But I have to go back to the salvage yard!” retorted Jupiter. “It’s about an important matter.”

The inspector pointed inside the car. “Get in there!”

“Are you going to arrest me?”

“Don’t worry,” Inspector Cotta replied. “I think you’ll get away with community service.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jupe as he climbed into the back seat. “Without a court order?”

Inspector Cotta ignored the question, got into the car and started the engine. “I see you are out today as a cleaner. That fits well. The toilets at the police department look like they’ve never been cleaned for ages.”

“Mr Blond knows where you live!” Pete said to Finley.

“I see,” he mumbled.

“I’d be really worried if I were you!” Pete was getting impatient. “There’s a strange man following you and there are thugs lurking outside your house.”

“Maybe it’s you who should be worried,” Finley suggested. “After all, your friend was attacked.”

“And what about that bruise on your chin?” exclaimed Pete. “It looks bad!”

“A little slip while surfing,” Finley explained. “I’m asking you to leave now as I have work here!”

“He really drives me up the wall!” said Pete as he stood outside the shop with Bob a moment later.

“The news didn’t leave him cold though.” Bob peered through the shop window. “I saw a hint of fear behind his poker face.”

“Then you can see through him better than I do.”

“Finley’s picking up the phone!” Bob noted. “I bet he’s calling his grandma now.”

“Something is mighty fishy here.” Pete paced nervously. “Why won’t Finley talk to us?”

Bob cautiously peered further through the shop window. “I think he’s making a note of something.”

“Probably instructions on how he can best drive me mad!” Pete snorted.

“—Or the note from Mr Blond!” Bob pondered. “He gave Finley’s grandma a note. He didn’t write much down. Two or three words at the most—or a phone number.”

“I’m hungry!” Pete looked over at the little harbour café. “I can’t think on an empty stomach.”

“That’s Jupe’s line.”

“Then our First Investigator is right once again.” Pete ran an energetic hand through his hair. “Will you hold the fort for a moment?”

12. Pete's Surfing Abilities

Jupiter Jones washed his hands for the third time in the last five minutes. He had worn gloves. Still, he felt as if all the dirt and grime were sticking to him. He longed for a shower and a fresh shirt.

"Ready?" Inspector Cotta entered the tiled room and looked around. "A great performance! Lemon freshness right up to the rim. We should get young investigators to work here more often in the future!"

"I don't think that's legal without a court order!" said Jupiter.

"You want to come to me with the law?" Inspector Cotta laughed dryly. "May I remind you what you are here for?"

"I'd like to go now." Jupiter dried his hands on a paper towel. "The case is waiting."

"May I ask what it is about?"

Jupiter hesitated briefly. "It's about a boy from Michigan who was looking for a surfer here in Rocky Beach."

"Then you'd better find the surfer by noon tomorrow and get him ashore," Inspector Cotta suggested. "The weather service is expecting a pretty storm and huge swells!"

Pete was once again tapping his fingers impatiently against his surfboard. Bob had thankfully stood guard outside the shop a little longer so that the Second Investigator could fetch his surfboard from home.

After that, Bob had gone off to meet Jupe at the salvage yard. Later, one of them would relieve Pete again.

"You're still here." Finley came out of the shop, his backpack slung loosely over his shoulder and a surfboard under his arm.

"We still have a deal, after all." Pete pointed to his board. "Hang five and hang ten... then we'll talk."

It was not far from the harbour to the beach, but it seemed very long to Pete today. Finley remained stubbornly silent, even when they were together in the changing rooms. It was too warm for a wetsuit. Pete had opted for swimming trunks and a surf shirt, Finley likewise. They locked their things in the lockers behind the changing rooms and walked side by side to the water.

Surprisingly, it was Finley who broke the silence. "For every slope you ride flawlessly, I'll answer a question for you."

"Deal!" Pete's sporting enthusiasm was aroused. For once, this was an investigation task that was dependent on surfing abilities.

He paddled out onto the water. Finley was right beside him. There was no sign of the big storm that was supposedly brewing. Seagulls sailed across the cloudless sky, sunbathers lay on the beach, and there was quite a bit of activity in the water.

It took a while before it was Pete's turn. The wave built, rolled in, and he jumped on his surfboard. That was the easy part. Now he had to move one foot to the front of the board and extend five toes of that foot over the front edge. To do so, he had to wait for the right moment.

Pete took a deep breath. Don't wobble! Don't tip over! Don't fall! Keep your balance! One step... two steps... three steps... Put a foot forward... Stretch out the toes.

Pete cheered inwardly. The surfboard was lifted by the wave and lowered again. Pete wobbled but held his ground. White water foamed up. Then the Second Investigator jumped off.

"Done!" he said proudly as he paddled next to Finley.

"Who would have thought?" Finley's expression was inscrutable.

"So," Pete began, "where were you on 17th August last year at around 9 pm?"

"Do I need an alibi?"

"Just answer my question!"

"I was on my way home," Finley replied. For a moment, it looked like that was all, but then he kept talking: "I was surfing that day. I still remember that the swell was great. Unfortunately, I had promised to be back by half past nine at the latest."

"Your way home goes past Coast View Drive, doesn't it?" Pete continued.

"That's a new question," Finley said.

Pete waved it off. "I don't even need to ask. If you want to get from the beach to your house, you have to go along Coast View Drive. Anything else would be a detour."

"I don't mind detours," Finley said.

"Let's still assume that you were at Coast View Drive on 17th August at around 9 pm," Pete said. "What happened there? Did you see anything? Did you have a date with someone?"

"Hey! Take it easy!" Finley grinned. "That's three questions at once."

"All right," Pete relented. "I get the picture. One hang ten and I'm back on."

"You have to be more skilful in your interrogation," Finley explained, "so that you get as far as possible with one question."

Pete paddled off. He would show Finley!

Bud's Health Food was a wholefood restaurant at Rocky Beach Shopping Centre. Cosy the restaurant was not, but it offered an unusual mix of healthy and exotic food. This was the place to go for quinoa burgers or seitan sausages.

"I think I'll have a shake of almond milk and bananas," Jupiter considered after a first glance at the menu. "I'm not so sure about the food yet."

"Buckwheat pancakes," recommended Bob, who had taken a seat opposite him. He looked at the television screen that was diagonally above his friend. A cartoon show was showing.

"I need something stronger!" grumbled Juve. "After today's events, what I really need is a double chicken burger with extra cheese."

Bob shook his head. "Everything at Bud's is vegan now—no chicken, no cheese."

"The world is against me."

"I've had a good smack on the nose today," Bob reminded him.

"Then the world is against us." Jupiter lowered the menu and looked around. "The waitress is coming. Is that her?"

Bob turned around as inconspicuously as possible. Then he nodded.

A girl with long, dark hair pushed her way between the closely packed tables to their table. "Good afternoon!"

"Good afternoon to you too!" said Bob, putting on his most charming smile.

The girl returned the smile immediately. "What can I get you?"

"I'd like the 'Shake Number 23' and the '7' to go with it," Jupiter said.

Bob was still beaming. "—And I'd like the '12'—with sweet and sour sauce—and a blackberry soda to go with it."

"Noted."

"Say, are you Finley's sister by any chance?" asked Bob casually.

"Yes! I'm Farryn!" The girl put the pad in the pocket of her apron.

"And I'm Bob. Bob Andrews."

"Hi, Bob. So you know my little brother?"

"We surf together," Bob lied.

"So you surf too."

"Sure," Bob said. "Who doesn't in California?"

She laughed. "I know quite a few people who prefer to stay on land."

"—But your brother is definitely not one of them."

"Finley? He only gets off his surfboard to eat and sleep," Farryn said, "and when he has to go to school."

"—And when he works," Jupiter added. "He works at Liquid Teal, doesn't he?"

"Uh, yeah, hold on," Farryn replied. Then she nodded to a lady who was waiting for her order to be taken three tables away.

Jupiter slumped down a bit. Normally he was in charge of the interviews, but the combination of an empty stomach and an extremely pretty girl reduced his efficiency.

"I have to get on with my work now," Farryn said when no further order from the boys followed.

Bob therefore decided to take a more direct approach. "You know the guy who drives the van for Liquid Teal? Short brown hair, about your brother's height... would have to be in his early twenties; hangs out with two other guys in your area; and they go around in a lowered car."

The girl looked at Bob uncertainly. "Why do you want to know?"

"We want to help Finley," Bob revealed confidently. "Really!"

"Why?" she asked, confused.

"Because he might be in danger." Bob leaned forward. "It would be really great if you could tell us more about this man!"

She screwed up her face. "I don't know. I don't know you guys, and honestly, I don't want any trouble."

"Trouble?"

She nodded. "You're talking about Dylan Parks... and whatever he's involved in, trouble is never far!"

13. The Charity Gala

“What do you mean?” Bob asked.

“As I said before, I don’t want any trouble... and neither does Finley.” Farryn crossed her arms as if to protect herself from further questions.

“He’s probably already in trouble,” Jupiter interjected. “We really do have a reasonable suspicion that your brother is in danger.”

Farryn looked around nervously. “I have to work. If I stand around and talk, my boss will fire me. We’ll talk when I bring you the drinks.”

With those words, she turned and squeezed her way between the tables to the lady. It was quite a while before she came back to the boys’ table and brought the drinks. Jupiter watched her as she did so, as if trying to observe her movements closely.

“Blackberry soda and almond shake.” Farryn placed the glasses on the table in front of the boys. Then she added quietly: “Dylan Parks strikes before he asks questions, so you should be careful when dealing with him.”

“I have already had that experience,” Bob confessed.

“Oh dear,” Farryn said sympathetically.

“What else can you tell us about him?”

“He works at Liquid Teal with two guys from his gang,” Farryn reported in a lowered voice. “—Not in the shop though, but in the factory. It’s not in Rocky Beach, but in the little industrial area down by Reina del Mar. As far as I know, they paint the boards.

“Dylan is also a pretty good surfer. He tests the new surfboards for the company. He likes to show off and claims that soon he’ll be able to ride for Liquid Teal as a pro. They supposedly want to build him up big. Then the dream of endless summer becomes reality.”

“—Because then he gets to surf full-time?” asked Jupiter.

“Exactly,” Farryn replied. “When the temperatures drop here, it’s off to Hawaii for the big competitions at the company’s expense.” She blinked. “Be right back with the food, okay?”

“She seemed pretty upset just now,” Bob remarked when Farryn was out of earshot.

Jupe nodded slowly. “Interesting.”

“What?”

“Everything.” Jupe took a sip of his shake.

Bob waited for an explanation, but his friend remained thoughtfully silent. As long as the First Investigator was not sure, he would definitely keep his thoughts to himself.

The waves were good. Pete maintained his balance on the surfboard again. By a hair’s breadth, he tipped to one side, but at the last moment, he compensated for the movement. One more step, then both his feet were on the front of the board, and all ten toes stretched over the edge.

“Hang ten!” he yelled to Finley.

He held the position for a few seconds, then lost his balance and plunged headlong into the foaming white water.

“Well, I’ll just let that pass,” Finley decided generously. “It’s not perfect, Superboy, but it wasn’t bad for a beginner.”

“I’m not a beginner!” Pete spat out salt water. Then he came to his senses. Now it came down to asking a question Finley could not dodge.

“Did you see or encounter anything to do with a Dr Kooning at Coast View Drive on 17th August?”

Finley looked Pete straight in the eye and said nothing. He had figured out by now that he could unsettle the Second Investigator with no response.

“So, what is it?” Pete asked.

“Yes,” Finley said.

“Yes what?”

“Yes, I saw something concerning a Dr Kooning on Coast View Drive on 17th August.”

“That’s not very helpful!” said Pete discontentedly.

“It’s not my fault,” Finley replied curtly.

“What was your role in all this?” Pete continued to probe.

“Do one more manoeuvre and I’ll tell you.”

“Out of the question!” Pete slapped the water angrily.

“Then there’s no answer either,” Finley said, amused.

“This is extortion!”

Finley gave the Second Investigator an inscrutable look. “Is that so?”

“Then keep the answer to yourself,” Pete said irritably.

“Kryptonite,” Finley shouted before he started paddling.

“What?”

“My role in all of this... I’m Kryptonite!”

A moment later, Finley was standing on his surfboard. Pete looked at him go. Now the Second Investigator was not really any smarter than before, but at least he had something to report when Jupiter and Bob showed up on the beach an hour later.

“Kryptonite is a fictional element that weakens the comic book hero Superman,” Jupiter explained after Pete had finished his extremely brief report.

“Thanks, I already know that,” Pete said. “I happen to be an avid comic reader! Finley described his role in all this as Kryptonite. Perhaps he meant that he is the weak link to something... to his family, for instance... or that he has some sort of weakness that keeps people away.”

“He seems to have a weakness for cryptic answers,” Bob said, “but it’s more likely that we’re not getting anywhere with him.”

“Perhaps he meant that he is jinxed,” Pete continued.

“Let’s put a question mark over this point for now... but we can now firmly assume that Dr Kooning was in the area at the time in question,” Jupiter changed the subject. “However, we don’t have any concrete evidence of that yet. If we find out what he was doing on 17th August, we will be a significant step further.”

Pete looked out to the sea. “My interrogation has as good as failed. Finley knows something, but I just can’t get anything out of him.”

“Not even for a ‘hang twenty’?” Bob grinned.

Pete made a throwing away hand gesture. “That’s probably a manoeuvre for surfing dogs, not us!”

“Water sports for pets are not up for discussion here,” Jupiter said sternly. “I would suggest we split up again, fellas. I’ll go to Liquid Teal and talk to Mr Tealson, Bob will check for information on Dr Kooning and 17th August, and Pete will hold down the fort here on the beach.”

As there were no significant dissenting votes, Jupiter’s proposal was put into action.

Bob would have liked to go to the *Los Angeles Times* for his research. His father worked at this big newspaper that had its editorial offices in a high-rise building in the middle of LA. Also within this building was a great archive section housing past issues of the newspaper. However, with the traffic in the big city, Bob would be on the road for half an eternity.

As Bob had no desire for an evening in a traffic jam, he decided to return to Headquarters to do his search on the Internet.

He soon found several articles in which Matt’s father was mentioned by name. The date of 17th August did not appear, but the day before, he had been a guest at a charity gala in Los Angeles—more precisely in the Beverly Hills district. So Bob had something concrete to look for.

There were numerous photos of the event on a pop culture website—photos of exaggeratedly smiling guests in cocktail dresses and dinner jackets, mingling around a huge buffet table of sumptuous food. The hosts had also engaged a band to perform there that night on an elaborately lit stage.

When Bob saw a photo of the band, he was stirred. This was a group managed by Rock-Plus Music Agency! Bob regularly worked there as an assistant to supplement his pocket money. The agency offered him the opportunity to go to concerts for free and to meet promising musicians.

The band in the photos was called ‘Coconut Diamonds’. The front woman, Stacey Warren, was clearly recognizable in the photo. Bob went through more photos especially those featuring people on the dance floor. However, he paid much more attention to what could be seen in the surroundings. He zoomed in on one photo. The faces were a bit blurred, but in combination with the clothes, there was no doubt—Dr Kooning was standing at the buffet table and talking to Stacey. In another photo, they appeared together again in the background—this time with champagne glasses in their hands.

“Bingo!” Bob called out. He didn’t know Stacey personally, but Sax Sendler, the boss of Rock-Plus, might give Bob her phone number. Sax thought highly of Bob and also of the work of The Three Investigators.

In fact, the agency boss was generous with the information about Stacey. He not only gave Bob her phone number, but also her address.

“Say hello to her for me!” he said on the phone. “Tell her to show up at the office again sometime. I want to talk to the Coconuts about some gigs in the autumn.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you!” said Bob good-humouredly.

14. Interrogating Stacey Warren

The address Bob had noted down was only a short distance northwest of Rocky Beach. By car, he could be there in fifteen minutes.

Bob did not think twice. Stacey Warren had talked to Dr Kooning on 16th August either several times or for a very long time. Maybe they had only talked about the weather or about the band's music, but they had seemed very familiar with each other. Therefore, Stacey could possibly remember something that was important for the case. It was worth a try.

Bob steered his Beetle onto the coastal road towards Malibu. The colouring of the sky over the sea ranged from a warm yellow on the horizon to turquoise and all shades of blue. The sun was already low, leaving a golden shine on the water. To the right were stretched hills covered with dry bushes. White terraced houses kept appearing between rocks and palm trees.

Less than ten minutes later, Bob turned off the coastal road. A winding road led up the hills to a small neighbourhood. Stacey Warren lived in a large, grey-brown wooden house.

The building was weathered by the sea air and consisted of two storeys. There was a flagpole with the pirate flag, Jolly Roger. On the verandah were benches and tables made of driftwood, and old boat lamps hung next to the entrance door. As a child, Bob had imagined the dwellings of smugglers or beachcombers like this.

Instead of a doorbell, there was a bell pull. Bob waited and looked around in the meantime. Everything was quite dilapidated with rotting wood, crumbling concrete, and rusty metal parts. Nevertheless, Bob liked it much better here than at the Stenseths' in Las Tunas Street.

"Hi!" A young woman with wild black curls opened the door.

"Hello!" said Bob. "Is Stacey there? I'm Bob Andrews from Rock-Plus Music Agency. We arrange performances for the Coconut Diamonds from time to time."

"You're lucky! She's getting ready for a gig right now. Hang on a sec." She turned and called out: "Stacey! You have a visitor!"

There was no reply.

"She's still upstairs." A man with long hair stepped into the doorway. "I'll get her. Her Majesty has been hogging the bathroom for far too long."

When he had disappeared into the depths of the house, the young woman led Bob into a large kitchen that would have made a good movie set for Pippi Longstocking's Villa Villekulla. Everything was colourful and messy.

"Stacey is performing at the big beach festival in Malibu tonight," the woman said, "not with the Coconuts though, but with Jellyfish. Unfortunately, you can't stay afloat with just one band."

"Are you a musician too?" asked Bob.

"I play bass with Remote Control... My name is Liv." She went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle. "Want a drink?"

"No thanks," Bob politely declined. "Do you all live here?"

"Yeah, five of us share this house," Liv said. "All musicians. Between us, we play in eight different bands."

“Here I am!” Stacey Warren entered the kitchen. She was wearing a short summer dress and flip-flops. Her long blonde hair fell loose to her waist. “Who’s asking for me?”

“Bob Andrews, from Rock-Plus Music Agency,” Bob introduced himself. “I got your address from Sax Sendler.”

“Ah, you’re the student who’s been working part-time for him!” said Stacey. “You were involved with the Hula Whoops some time ago, weren’t you?”

“Right, but I don’t just work in the music business though...” Bob reached into his trouser pocket and unearthed the card of The Three Investigators. “My friends and I run a little investigation agency over in Rocky Beach.”

“What am I? The prime suspect in a bank robbery?” Stacey frowned.

“Don’t worry,” Bob assured her. “I just need some information from you, but it could be very important. It’s about a boy who might be threatened.”

“Sounds dramatic! How can I help?”

“You had a gig with the Coconut Diamonds at a party. It was a charity party,” Bob explained. “It took place a little over a year ago—16th August to be exact, in Beverly Hills. You were talking to a man there—a Dr Kooning.”

Stacey suddenly looked tense. Then she grabbed a box that was lying on the kitchen table. “Come with me to the patio. I need a cigarette.”

Bob exchanged a quick glance with Liv who looked confused, but said nothing. Then he followed Stacey out into the open.

“There’s not much to tell,” the blonde singer blurted out. She clumsily pulled a cigarette out of the box and almost broke it in the process. “We played, Dr Kooning was thrilled and he considered booking us for a party... but nothing came of it.”

“Did Dr Kooning happen to mention to you any plans for the following few days, for example, dates or places to go?”

“No.” Stacey took a drag on the cigarette and puffed little clouds in Bob’s direction. He suppressed the impulse to wave his hand in front of his face and cough demonstratively.

“As I said, it was all about the gig. We put on a great performance that night.”

“Did you notice anything else about Dr Kooning?” asked Bob.

Stacey shook her head vigorously. “I don’t remember that now! It was like a thousand years ago!”

“Did Dr Kooning ever get back to you?”

“Why should he?” She pressed the half-smoked cigarette into a large half-shell that served as an ashtray.

“Well, about booking your band for a party,” Bob said.

“No, he didn’t. I’ve got to go now. I have a gig in Malibu.”

“Well, thanks for the time... and good luck,” said Bob. “Please come to the agency in the next few days. Sax must have some plans for you.”

“Cool. I’ll do that!”

Slowly Bob strolled back to his Beetle. Crickets chirped in the dry grass and the sun bathed the hills in a warm, reddish light. However, Bob took no notice of the evening atmosphere. He thought of Stacey’s reaction to his questions. She had been nervous and clearly trying to hide something from him. Only what?

“Hey, Bob!” Liv had stepped out of the house and was coming down the wooden stairs to the street. “Wait!”

“What is it?”

“Is there really a boy in danger?”

“I suppose so,” Bob said.

Liv exhaled audibly. “She’s lying!”

Bob looked at her in surprise. “Stacey?”

“Yes, exactly.” The young woman rubbed her palms together. “I heard what she said to you on the patio. The window was open.”

“You overheard us.”

“No, not on purpose,” Liv defended herself. Her guilty conscience was literally written all over her face. “Okay... intentionally—because it was about that Kooning!”

“What do you know about him?”

“He was getting too close to Stacey. The man has a wife and a son, but that doesn’t stop him from mixing with other women. He even took Stacey out to dinner—and it wasn’t about booking any gig as Stacey had claimed. The day after the party in Beverly Hills, they went to a seafood restaurant somewhere in Rocky Beach—eating lobster.”

“You remember that so well?” Bob wondered.

“I know that for a fact because Stacey and I had a huge fight that night.” Liv looked down at the ground in dismay. “Stacey had just broken up with a singer from my band. This is a good friend of mine and he was really messed up. Then she brings in this doctor—a married guy who’s also at least twenty years older than her! I confronted her and she totally shut me up.”

“So Stacey was out with Dr Kooning on 17th August?”

Liv ran her hand through her frizzy black hair. “I don’t know what date it was... but the night before was the party you asked about. Must have been a pretty gigantic thing and a great gig for the Coconut Diamonds. I was a bit jealous to be honest. Stacey then accused me of that, by the way.”

“Can you remember if Stacey had dinner with Dr Kooning during the day or in the evening?”

“In the evening—definitely,” Liv replied. “It was already dark when the guy drove her back in his convertible. I was just sitting on the patio with the boys. I don’t know what kind of car it was, but that thing looked expensive. Kooning got out and opened the door for Stacey. Shortly afterwards, he drove off and then there was the argument.”

“Thank you,” said Bob. “That helps me a lot!”

Liv handed him a card. “Remote Control is a really good band. I’d love for you to recommend Sax Sendler to us.”

Bob accepted the card. “I can do that.”

When he finally sat in his Beetle, he could hardly wait to tell Jupiter and Pete about his little trip. So Dr Kooning had indeed been in Rocky Beach at the time in question... and everything else fitted together too!

There was a small seafood restaurant situated very close to Coast View Drive. It had a very good reputation, but was so expensive that Bob and his friends had never been in there before. Apparently Kooning and Stacey had eaten there and then driven back along the coast.

The only question that remained was why this drive mattered—and what Finley and Farryn had to do with it!

When Bob rejoined Jupiter and Pete at the beach, the sun had already set and a pale moon was in the sky. Many surfers had put down their boards and were now sitting together in

small groups... except for Finley. The dark-haired boy sat a little apart from the others and looked out to sea. Pete and Jupiter kept a constant eye on him.

"There's news... and nerve food!" Bob handed his friends a burger each. At the Second Investigator's request, Bob had stopped off on the way and got them all something to eat.

"Thank you! I was really starving!" Pete mumbled between two bites.

"Dr Kooning was at Coast View Drive a year ago!" Bob blurted out. He didn't even wait for his friends' reaction, but reported what he had learned from Stacey's housemate. "It all fits—the day, the time and the place!"

Finley turned to look at The Three Investigators. His facial expression was once again difficult to interpret.

"Did he hear what I just said?" asked Bob quietly.

"Then he would have to have exceptionally good hearing," Jupiter said.

Pete swallowed the rest of his burger. "He's really driving me crazy!"

"Don't complain, Pete!" admonished Jupiter. "After all, you get to spend the whole day on the surfboard during these investigations. Besides, we're not dealing with curses, ghosts or demons this time."

"I'll never say anything against ghosts again!" asserted Pete.

Jupiter grinned, but then he became serious. "I spoke to Jim Tealson from Liquid Teal. That's one of the two owners. He confirmed that Dylan Parks works for him and has a good chance of becoming a surf pro with the company."

"Good for him," Bob said sullenly. His nose still hurt a little.

"I didn't just ask about Dylan Parks," Jupe added, "but also about Farryn Stenseth. Something struck me at Bud's Health Food, which I then brought up with Mr Tealson." He smiled contentedly.

"So what is it?" asked Pete impatiently.

"I'd like to know that too," Bob said.

Meanwhile, Finley had stood up and was brushing sand off his swimming trunks.

"Tomorrow morning we'll meet at Headquarters," Jupiter decided. "Then we'll get all the facts together. Until then, we should divide the further work sensibly. You take turns guarding Finley and I'll go talk to Stacey Warren."

"You don't even know her," Bob interjected. "Shouldn't I do that instead?"

"I need to know if my theory is correct," Jupe replied.

"I have to tell you that she's not exactly talkative," Bob continued. "You might not even get a word out of her."

"You just let me worry about that." Jupiter waved it off. "I'll confront her with a well-balanced combination of facts and suppositions and concentrate on her reaction."

"You'll have to go to Malibu right now for that," Bob said. "Stacey's band is playing at a beach party there."

"A beach party?" Jupiter screwed up his face as if he had bitten into a lemon. "Not exactly to my taste, but there's nothing to be done about it. I'll go and ask those boys over there in a minute." He pointed to a group of teenagers sitting together laughing. They all attended Rocky Beach High School and were in the same grade as The Three Investigators. "They don't miss a beach party within a 50-kilometre radius during the holidays, do they? With any luck, they'll take me. Then I won't have to borrow a car."

"But—" Bob objected, but the First Investigator was already not listening.

"Jupe is driving me crazy!" said Pete as his friend stomped away.

"Me too." Bob sighed. "It's a terribly annoying habit of his to constantly withhold information from us."

Pete kicked a stone aside. “As always, he wants to present the solution of the case with a grand performance and surprise us all. He doesn’t mind that we’re in the dark for so long.”

“Finley’s leaving!”

“—Without saying goodbye!” Pete wanted to run after the boy, but Bob held his friend by the arm. “I’ll take over for now. You can take a break and relieve me later.” He patted the Second Investigator on the shoulder and followed Finley a little way across the beach to the promenade.

Pete looked at the two of them leaving. The stars twinkled in the cloudless evening sky. There were still no signs of a storm. Nevertheless, the Second Investigator felt a strange inner restlessness—as if there was something brewing in the air—something that had the power to yank him off his surfboard.

15. Beach Party in Malibu

Jupiter had managed to get a ride. With deafening music, he and four others went to Malibu in a car.

The First Investigator was not a party person. Dancing on a crowded beach until dawn was one of the activities he was happy to do without. He preferred to tinker with gadgets at home, read scientific texts or play chess against his computer. However, when it came to a case, Jupiter threw his preferences overboard without hesitation.

The theory in his head took on ever clearer forms. He had the feeling he was right on track. All he needed now was confirmation. He hoped to get it from Stacey Warren. The singer of the Coconut Diamonds was involved in the whole thing—at least as a witness! All he had to do was to get her to make a statement.

However, this turned out to be more difficult than expected. In Malibu, the beach party was already in full swing and the band was just starting their performance. There was no telling when the musicians would take their first break. So Jupe had no choice but to mingle with the revellers.

He bought an orange soda from a booth and took a look around. To his right was the stage. Behind it was a small area for the technicians and musicians. With a bit of luck, he could get close enough to talk to Stacey during the break.

“What are you doing here?” Brandon Rink came sauntering towards Jupiter.

“Celebrate,” Jupiter said tersely.

“Doesn’t look like it, to be honest,” Brandon replied, “all alone like that.”

Jupiter thought about how best to get rid of Brandon, but then he decided that he might as well talk to him. As long as Stacey was on stage, he had nothing to do anyway.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he told Brandon.

“I needed some fresh air.”

“There’s fresh air everywhere at a beach.”

“—But there are too many people around.” Brandon pointed to a cluster of people.

Jupiter recognized several teenagers from Rocky Beach—almost all were surfers. It looked like they were standing around someone.

“The guys from Liquid Teal are here today,” Brandon continued, “and they’re in show-off mode as usual.”

“Is Dylan Parks there?”

“You know him?” Brandon screwed up his face.

“Not really,” Jupiter said.

“Dylan has been making big speeches about how he’s going to ride the most dangerous waves of the year tomorrow. What a loud mouth! I bet the swell will sweep him off the board without mercy.”

Just then, Jupiter happened to notice Dylan Parks who seemed to visibly enjoy the admiration of the younger surfers.

“Oh yeah... he asked about Pete,” Brandon added.

“What?” Jupe responded in surprise.

“Dylan wanted to know why Pete was hanging out with Stenseth lately,” Brandon reported. “He saw the two of them on the beach today. I don’t know why that’s important to him, but it’s weird, isn’t it?”

Jupiter did not answer. Dylan was still a big question mark in the case. The First Investigator could not yet assess what role he was playing, but it was clear that he did not shy away from violence in the process. He had shown Bob that in no uncertain terms. So Dylan knew that The Three Investigators had indeed contacted Finley.

“To be honest, I also wonder why Pete was with Stenseth all afternoon,” Brandon reflected. “They can’t stand each other!”

Just then, a youth broke away from the group, leaving a gap. That was enough space for Jupiter to take a closer look at Dylan Parks. However before the First Investigator could make a move, Dylan Parks looked up and saw him. Then Parks made a gesture with his hand. Barely visible, but nevertheless unmistakable, he ran his stretched-out thumb over his throat.

Jupiter simply interpreted this as ‘You’re as good as dead!’

After Pete had taken his break, he texted Bob and learned that he was just outside Finley’s house at Las Tunas Street. It was time for the changing of the guard, so Pete made his way there.

“Where’s your car?” Bob asked when Pete joined him in the Beetle. The clock on the dashboard of his Beetle read 10:30 pm. Finley’s house lay before them in the light of the yellowish street lamps.

“I cycled here,” Pete said.

“What if you have to follow him?”

“He doesn’t have a car,” Pete said, “at least I’ve never seen one... and he didn’t have a driver’s licence in his wallet either. If he should get the idea of leaving his house tonight, I guarantee it will be by bike!”

“What if he takes the bus?” asked Bob.

Pete made a long face but then he waved it off. “In the first place, why should Finley even leave his house tonight?”

“Then why should we even keep watch here?” Bob asked back.

“Maybe something will happen,” Pete replied.

“Anyway, I’m off for my break,” Bob said. “You stay here and text me if necessary.”

“Aye, aye, Captain!” Pete said and jumped out of the car. Then Bob drove off.

A truck was parked opposite the Stenseth family’s house. It was the perfect cover for Pete and his bicycle. He leaned his bike against a fence and then peered past the bonnet of the truck across the street.

There were no lights shining at the Stenseth house and no one to be seen. Only a cat was creeping across the porch. Pete was sure that Finley was sleeping, dreaming of perfect waves.

Or not! Suddenly, Pete spotted a figure next to the house. It was a human outline that moved swiftly. Indeed! Finley had climbed out of a window and was now pushing a bicycle towards the road. He peered briefly left and right, then swung onto the saddle.

Pete waited a moment before following the boy. Under no circumstances should Finley notice that Pete was following him!

The boy did not stay long on Las Tunas Street, but turned right just past the bus stop. The Second Investigator pedalled hard. Hillcrest Road led up a hill in tight curves. Pete had to exert himself quite a bit on the incline, but he didn’t mind the sporting effort.

The lights of Rocky Beach flickered down in the valley, but up here there were no street lamps—only the silvery white light of the moon. The terrain became increasingly rocky and to the left and right of the roadway grew dense bushes and low trees that cast long shadows. Now and then, narrow footpaths led to higher vantage points. There were no houses along this section of the road.

Pete reached a bend lined by a wall of natural stones. Right next to the road, a path branched off, running between a few rocks along a dried-up creek bed. Finley's bike was leaning against a tree with scaly bark.

Pete looked around. There was no sign of Finley. A sign informed hikers that the Sycamore Trail to Hillcrest Reservoir began here. The trail ended at the top of Reservoir View with a car park overlooking all of Rocky Beach.

Pete had walked this path many times before. He knew that there were some uneven spots. It was not a problem during the day, but quite a challenge at night without a flashlight. Of course Pete had a flashlight with him. It was part of the basic equipment of The Three Investigators, but the Second Investigator did not want to take any risk of being discovered.

Careful not to make a tell-tale noise, he crept along behind Finley. After a sharp bend, the terrain dropped steeply to his left. He had to be especially careful here! One false step and he would fall three metres into the dry creek bed. He could well do without this painful experience.

The Sycamore Trail curved again and led uphill. Before each bend in the trail, Pete slowed his steps, peered around bushes and rocks and only continued on his way when he was sure he had enough distance behind Finley.

The Second Investigator already thought he was going all the way to the car park, but then the boy in front of him suddenly stopped halfway.

There was a small rest area here with two benches, a table and a display board. Behind it was an entrance walled into the hill of sand and rock. The iron grille that was supposed to block it hung loosely on its hinges. The passage behind the grille led to an old water tunnel. It had been shut down at the same time as the old reservoir and was considered to be in danger of collapsing. Although a sign on the grille proclaimed 'No Trespassing!', the entrance was broken into again and again. The Second Investigator hoped that the pursuit did not continue in the tunnel.

Finley peered into the dark opening but did not enter. He looked around.

"Hello?" he called out quietly into the night.

"Good evening!" Mr Blond had appeared on the other side of the footpath and came towards Finley.

Pete was surprised by the blond man's sudden appearance, but he should have expected it.

"Lovely evening, isn't it?" Mr Blond swung a small suitcase as he walked, as if he were on a happy Sunday hike. "This is such an idyllic spot!"

"Do you have the money?" asked Finley tensely.

"I always carry this suitcase for fun!" Mr Blond laughed out. It was a sinister, fake laugh. "What's the matter? No humour?"

"Ha! Ha!" Finley muttered sarcastically.

Mr Blond made a disapproving noise. "Humour doesn't seem to be your strong point any more than politeness. So let's just get down to business." He placed the case on the wooden table and opened it. "Sixteen hundred dollars."

"Thank you," Finley said curtly.

“May I ask why it shouldn’t be sixteen thousand dollars?” Mr Blond placed the bundled banknotes on the tabletop.

“I only need sixteen hundred!” growled Finley.

“My boss wants you to know that this is a one-time deal. If you accept the money, that’s it—no more payments, no contact with him or his family, and no police. In fact, not a word about the incident on 17th August last year.”

“Okay,” Finley said.

“—But there’s one more thing,” Mr Blond said. He waved his index finger as if he was talking to a naughty child.

Finley looked at the man in confusion.

“You’re going to tell me what happened on 17th August,” Mr Blond explained. “Tell me first, then I’ll give you the money.”

Pete leaned forward tensely. Now it was getting interesting!

“Didn’t Dr Kooning tell you?” asked Finley snottily.

“Watch out! Now you’re being rude again,” the man warned. His voice was suddenly ice-cold. “I can’t stand that! And I don’t want to hear questions from you either. I only want answers.”

“What for? So that you yourself can blackmail Dr Kooning? So that you have something on him?” asked Finley angrily. The boy audibly wavered between anger and uncertainty.

“I’ll repeat it one last time.” Mr Blond reached into his leather jacket and pulled out a gun. “I only want answers!” There was a soft click as he took the safety off. “So please. Go ahead!”

“It’s all right! Dr Kooning was—” Finley began, but he could not finish the sentence.

Lights flashed through the night, branches cracked, leaves rustled. It was quietly at first, then louder and louder. Then came sounds of children’s voices!

“Here we are again! The break with canned music is hereby over,” Stacey Warren bellowed into the microphone. “Are you ready, Malibu?” The audience hooted and clapped and the band began to play.

Jupiter stood contentedly backstage. Not only had he managed to catch Stacey during her break, but he had also got the crucial answers! The individual pieces of the puzzle in his head now formed a coherent picture. Everything fitted together except for a few minor details that the First Investigator still had to check.

He looked at his watch. With any luck, he could get to the bus stop in time before the last bus left Malibu for Rocky Beach. The other boys from his school seemed to be having a great time. A ride back was not to be expected for the time being.

“Where are you going?”

Jupiter turned around and looked directly into the eyes of Dylan Parks.

“I’m going back to my friends. Is that forbidden? After all, it’s a party!”

Dylan Parks took a step forward. “Watch out, fatso. I’ve already warned your friend, still you don’t get it!”

Jupiter decided to play the clueless. “Don’t get what? I don’t know what you’re talking about. You hit Bob for visiting a friend and you threaten me for going to a party? That’s pretty weird, to be honest.”

“Everyone knows that you and your buddies are rotten snoopers!” hissed Parks. “—And I don’t believe in coincidences—especially not when you guys keep running into me—first at Liquid Teal, then on my street, and finally here!”

“I might as well say you’re following us,” Jupe replied. “What are you doing here at the party?”

“You have more courage than sense,” said Dylan Parks.

“I have courage and brains.” Jupe folded his arms. Here among the people, Dylan would not be able to hurt him.

“I don’t think so!” Dylan grabbed the First Investigator firmly by the arm. “I was just here for the good vibes, but now I’ve got better things to do.”

Two young men had joined them. One of them was standing so close behind Jupiter that the First Investigator felt his breath on the back of his neck.

Dylan Parks twisted his mouth into a grin. “Looks like I’m not just partying today, I’m doing some litter picking!”

A cold, pointed object was pressed into the First Investigator’s side. Was it a knife? He froze.

“You come along with us now,” Dylan Parks said with satisfaction. “—And don’t do anything stupid!”

16. The Stand-In Surfer

Finley and Mr Blond looked around in surprise. There were children's voices, but the individual words were hard to make out.

"Scouts," said Finley. "They do a night hike through the mountains here every year!"

"They're coming this way!" Mr Blond reacted quickly. He threw the money back into the case and folded it shut. "Change of plans. Write down everything about 17th August! Everything! Understood? Tomorrow you'll put the note in an envelope behind the grille of that water tunnel no later than 10 am!"

He put the gun back in his jacket. "If I like your answer, I'll contact you again to give you the money." With these words, he grabbed the suitcase and disappeared the way he had come.

It was not a minute too soon. The first scouts appeared on the slope. Finley wasted no time. With quick steps, he moved towards the spot where Pete was still crouching.

The Second Investigator jumped up. He clenched his teeth. His right leg had fallen asleep and was tingling uncomfortably but he could take no notice of that.

As quickly as the terrain allowed, he started back. First at a trot, then in ever larger steps. When the steep slope came, he slowed down again. There were simply too many tree roots and loose stones here.

"What are you doing here!" Someone grabbed Pete by the back of his backpack.

"Finley!"

"Don't act so surprised!" Finley gave Pete a shove. Instinctively, the Second Investigator grabbed a branch so as not to lose his balance.

"You just messed everything up!"

"Oh yeah?" Pete hissed back. "I've messed everything up, is it? You're a blackmailer! That's the way things are... and we wanted to protect you!"

"I didn't ask for protection!" Finley gave Pete another shove.

This time the Second Investigator pushed back. It was unreasonable to fight—even more so on a path that sloped steeply to one side. However at that moment, Pete didn't care about reason. "What's this about 17th August?"

"I don't want to talk about that anymore!" Finley raised both fists.

"If you don't talk, I'll report you." Pete was also getting ready to fight. "I'll go to Inspector Cotta and tell him you're a blackmailer!"

"You're just an annoying snitch, Superboy!"

"Don't call me that all the time!"

"I'll call you whatever I want, Superboy!"

Pete took a step forward. "And I don't have forever! So what is it? Are you talking?"

Finley made a swift movement, but Pete was faster. His body reacted immediately to the attack by lunging and hitting Finley in the shoulder with full force.

Finley let out a cry of pain, stumbled and fell into the bottomless darkness.

Jupiter was lying in a boat shed with his hands and feet tied. The dilapidated building was located away from the Malibu beach houses.

The First Investigator could shout for help but the beach party was too far away and besides, the band was still playing there at full volume. So Jupiter had to get himself out. He was sure that he would succeed. Nevertheless, the whole thing was extremely annoying.

Finally, he made a big step further in the case when he was interrupted by Dylan Parks of all people. At least the thugs hadn't stuck Jupe head-first into one of the portable toilets on the beach. That had been the original plan, but the crowd around the toilets had dissuaded Dylan. That could almost be called luck—especially after a day like this. Jupe had had enough of toilets in this case.

However, the First Investigator still didn't know what Dylan was going to do. The young man had stressed several times that Jupiter should not get in his way. It was obvious that he was planning something or was already in the middle of something crooked, and that in turn had to do with Finley. To make his point, Dylan had punched the First Investigator in the face. Apparently it was an established ritual with him... although it was not very creative.

In any case, anything is better than a dive in the toilet, Jupiter figured. He decided to ignore the pain and turn his attention to the shackles. He glanced at his ankles. Dylan and his mates had used ropes they had found in the shed—ropes that could be used to moor small boats. It was clear that Dylan knew about knots so Jupiter could not untie them easily.

He looked around. What he needed was a sharp object—something with which he could cut the rope. A metre away from him he spotted an empty bottle. If he managed to smash it, he could use the shards. It would take a long time, but at least it was a way out.

As best he could, the First Investigator crawled towards the bottle. Minutes passed before he could finally grab it... but the effort was worth it. When he hit the bottle on the ground, the neck broke off. What was left of it was a jagged tool made of thick, brown glass.

Jupiter began to scrape at his shackles. Not much happened at first. However, he was persistent. Eventually the shackles gave way and Jupe was freed.

"Now," he thought to himself, "it's time I get back at Dylan Parks!"

Pete climbed over the edge of the embankment. Finley was lying down hurt but was conscious. In any case, his curses were clearly audible. "You pushed me, Crenshaw!"

"It's your own fault! You attacked me first!" Pete said when he reached the bottom of the small ravine.

Finley was sitting in the middle of a flattened bush, rubbing his left leg. "I'm hurt!" he yelled at the Second Investigator.

"I said it's your own fault!" Pete bent down to examine Finley's leg. "Can you stand up?"

"No, Crenshaw!" Finley gritted his teeth.

"Then I'll call an ambulance," Pete offered.

"I just can't believe it!" Finley smacked the bushes with his right hand. "How can I be so unlucky?"

"Should I get an ambulance now?" asked Pete.

"Yes! No! Wait!" said Finley. "I have to think about it first. Maybe the pain will go away in a minute."

"And if not?"

"Then I'm finished anyway." Finley groaned, "and I mean really finished."

"Why?"

For a moment, it looked as if Finley was going to refuse to answer, but then he sighed. "Because I'm jinxed. That's the way it is! I need sixteen hundred dollars by morning. Now,

thanks to you, I can't deliver the money so I'm gonna have to surf. You did a great job, Crenshaw!"

"I'm an investigator," Pete defended himself. "It's my job to track down blackmailers."

Finley laughed out. "Your job! My job is to make ends meet somehow. My family is lacking at every turn, and once you have bad luck in your house, you can't get rid of it! Do you have any idea what it's like to have to go into debt?"

Pete shook his head. "No, I don't, but I hardly think I would blackmail anyone to get the money!"

"Dr Kooning had it coming!" growled Finley. "Besides, I didn't borrow the money from a bank, I borrowed it from someone who's putting me under a lot of pressure and charging crazy interest too!"

"Dylan Parks?" asked Pete.

"You know about him?" Finley looked up.

"Bob told me that he was somehow involved," Pete revealed. "So what? Did you borrow money from him?"

"Yes, I did," Finley admitted contritely. "There was no other way out. Dylan makes extra money by lending money and collecting it back with interest. When I couldn't pay it back fast enough, he started threatening me."

"So Dylan is a loan shark," Pete remarked. "That explains a lot... Did you say that since you can't replay him you now have to surf? Maybe you can tell me how it's all connected."

"Dream on!"

"What happened?" Pete continued unperturbed. "—With you and your sister and Dr Kooning?"

"You want me to give you answers? So you can run to your Inspector Cotta?" asked Finley. "I don't value being eliminated by the blond guy. In case you're interested, he's got a gun!"

"I saw that," said Pete. "That's precisely why it would be good if we asked Inspector Cotta for help."

"No police!" Finley tried to get up. He even managed it. However, he contorted his face painfully as he took his first step. "I need to rest and be fit on a surfboard in a few hours!"

"You'll never make it!" Pete looked at the boy doubtfully. "Besides, there's a storm expected with huge waves that will sweep everyone off the board."

"I know that, Crenshaw!" Finley took another step. He almost fell over in the process. "That's what the storm's all about. If I can't pay the sixteen hundred dollars, I'll have to surf!"

"What does Dylan get out of you surfing or even drowning?" asked Pete.

Finley groaned. "My goodness, when will you stop asking questions?"

"When the case is solved."

"I can't even run away," Finley complained. "All right, then... so you'll finally give it a rest... Dylan Parks has been bragging that he wants to take advantage of the heavy swell to test the latest surfboard from Liquid Teal to impress the Tealson cousins. It's a pro piece that he plans to compete with in the big competitions. His friends will be filming him doing it and interviewing him afterwards."

"But Dylan has no intention of riding the waves himself?" asked Pete.

"Of course not. That's far too risky. He's going to get himself filmed wearing a flashy neon yellow suit, and going into the water on the rocky part of the coast. Then he's going to disappear behind a huge boulder, where I would be waiting for him."

"Let me guess—you're also going to be in a flashy neon yellow suit!"

“Right,” Finley confirmed. “He gave me an identical suit.”

“Can’t someone tell the difference from the video clip?”

“If the camera is far enough away, you can’t see the face—especially when there’s a storm,” Finley said. “Dylan and I are also about the same height.”

“—But he has much shorter hair,” Pete interjected, “and brown too!”

“When they’re wet, they look dark. Dylan demanded that I cut my hair though.”

“What an idiotic plan!” Pete snapped.

“Not for Dylan,” Finley replied. “If it works out, he’ll have a really good argument for surfing for Liquid Teal as a pro.”

“And if you just say no?” Pete pondered.

“You don’t know Dylan very well, do you?” asked Finley. “The bad thing is it’s not just about me... it might be my sister or my grandmother. You never know where and how Dylan will strike. He broke a man’s arm on our street a fortnight ago because he couldn’t pay up.”

“We’ll think of something!” said Pete resolutely.

His mobile vibrated. It was a text from Bob:

Where are you? I’ll come and join you now.

“What is it?” asked Finley.

Pete did not answer. Instead he typed:

I’m with Finley. He’s hurt. Come urgently to Hillcrest Road, the starting point of the Sycamore Trail.

“Your personal taxi is coming,” Pete finally said to Finley. “Do you think you can make it to the road?”

“I hope Jupe answers his phone!” Pete said. He sat next to Bob on the floor of Finley’s room and dialled the First Investigator’s number.

By now it was six in the morning. After Jupiter had not responded to calls and text messages during the night, the boys had gone to sleep at Finley’s—with woollen blankets on the floor. In fact, none of them had any real rest.

Finley limped to the window and pushed aside the curtain. Just a few hours ago, it had been absolutely windless. Now the tall palm trees on the neighbouring property were moving, but the big storm was still waiting.

“Jupe?” Pete jumped up. “Finally!”

A monologue began at the other end of the line. Every now and then, Pete gave a “yes”, a “no” or a “hmm...”. It took quite a while before he could finally tell his part of the story. Bob, meanwhile, paced restlessly up and down the room. Just like Finley, he couldn’t stop looking out of the window to see if the wind was getting stronger.

“I see!” said Pete. Then another silence followed from his side. “Yes, let’s do that then. See you later!”

“Well?” Bob asked when the Second Investigator had hung up. “What is Jupe up to?”

Pete shrugged his shoulders. “Plan A is absolutely secret, but for Plan B, we’re supposed to grab some scissors and cut some hair.”

“What’s he doing here?” yelled Dylan Parks, pointing at Pete. The three of them were standing on the porch of the Stenseth house. By now, the wind was whistling sharply around the wooden beams and columns.

“I’m injured and have enough bruises to prove it,” said Finley. “Pete is standing in for me.”

“You must be taking me for a fool!” Dylan raised his right fist. “We have a deal!”

“I can’t surf for you,” Finley said. “I would only make a fool of you. Pete is of the right size and has the right hair colour... and now the right hairstyle too.”

“He’s not good enough!” rumbled Dylan.

“Yes, he is!” replied Finley emphatically. “He will be waiting at the agreed meeting point in an hour.”

“Then he’d better make an effort!” Dylan walked down the steps. “Don’t think you’re going to get out of this so easily, Stenseth!”

“He who laughs last laughs best,” Pete muttered when Dylan had departed.

“Don’t go out there!” said Finley sternly.

“I can do it,” Pete replied.

“That’s not courage, that’s recklessness.”

“Sometimes I’m reckless too,” Pete replied, “and if everything goes well, I don’t even need to get on the board. I trust Jupe completely there.”

Finley shook his head, half amused, half concerned. “You’re really out of your mind, Crenshaw!”

“That remains to be seen,” Pete said calmly. In fact, he was surprisingly calm, even when he set off for the coast shortly afterwards.

At first, everything went according to Dylan’s plan. Pete wore a T-shirt and long trousers over the flashy neon yellow suit so as not to attract attention.

At the small footpath leading to the beach, Pete signalled to Dylan. Then the Second Investigator entered a crooked headland and headed to the rocky part of the coast. Here one could hardly put one step in front of the other. Pete got sand and water blown in his face. Hunched over, he slowly worked his way along a narrow path.

At the front end of the headland was a huge boulder where he could hide behind until Dylan arrived. He hoped it would be soon as the waves were incredibly high!

He looked around again. Further up the slope was Café Seeblick. Somewhere behind the wide window front, Jupiter was sitting and going through Plan A.

17. The Storm is Here!

At Café Seeblick, Jupiter was seated at a table which gave him a good view of the beach and the rocky coast. The wind howled around the building and there was a crackling in the woodwork. The First Investigator could hardly stand the inner tension.

Where were the police? Inspector Cotta had been in a meeting but his assistant had promised to tell him to urgently go to the café. “It can only take a few more minutes!” she had assured... and yet there were no police in sight far and wide.

Instead, Stacey Warren sat opposite the First Investigator. The singer also looked very nervous and pushed her coffee cup back and forth. “This is all totally crazy!”

“You are doing the right thing,” Jupe assured her.

Just then, the door opened and a violent gust of wind swept through the room. The man Jupiter had seen once before in the hospital entered. The First Investigator had asked Stacey to call Dr Kooning to come meet her under some pretext.

The doctor smoothed out his suit, looked around briefly and then strode purposefully towards Stacey’s table. “Miss Warren! Good to see you.”

“James!” Stacey replied, sounding surprised. “Uh... hello.”

Confused, the doctor eyed the First Investigator. “May I ask who you are?”

“You may.” Jupiter handed the man the business card of The Three Investigators with a formal gesture. “My name is Jupiter Jones and I would like to talk to you about 17th August last year.”

Dr Kooning startled. He grabbed at his perfectly knotted tie as if it were squeezing the air out of him. His eyes narrowed to slits. “Why is that any of your business?”

“I will explain if you take a seat,” Jupiter put his fingertips together. Outwardly he seemed quite calm, but inwardly he was getting more and more restless. The police had to come! That was crucial for Plan A!

None of them had enough money to pay off Dylan Parks, but they could charge him with assault and false imprisonment. If Cotta’s people took him to the police department for questioning, the surfing operation had to be called off. In addition, Jupiter also wanted to solve the second part of the case at the same time. The inspector had to be present when the First Investigator exposed Dr Kooning, but Cotta still hasn’t shown up yet.

Jupiter’s beautiful plan wasn’t working out! Now he had to improvise. At least he had a portable audio recorder with him to secretly record the conversation. He had already switched it on when he saw Dr Kooning entering the café.

“Let’s get down to business,” Jupe said after Dr Kooning had sat down. “As we were able to establish through extensive investigation and questioning, you were fetching Miss Warren back to her house at around 9.00 pm on 17th August last year. Prior to this, you had a meal with her at a seafood restaurant here in Rocky Beach. While there, you drank copious amounts of white wine.”

“That is an insinuation!” said Dr Kooning in a cutting voice.

“More like a fact!” retorted Jupiter. “While under the influence of alcohol, you got into your car and drove along Coast View Drive. Through inattention, you provoked an accident and injured a young woman who had just come from the beach on her bicycle.”

Dr Kooning groaned. "I suppose you want to supplement your pocket money, but it's not going to happen, boy! You can't prove anything! Miss Warren is lying because she wants to make herself important!"

"Excuse me?" Stacey's eyebrows drew together.

"I don't want any money," Jupiter said calmly. "I am an investigator. I'm interested in the truth."

Again a gust of wind swept through the room. The First Investigator turned towards the door. Farryn appeared there. Jupiter had called her in the morning and asked her to come to the café.

"By the way," Jupiter continued, "this young woman is Farryn Stenseth, the accident victim."

"I don't know this girl," said Dr Kooning. He put his hand to his tie again.

"You hit me!" Farryn looked the doctor straight in the eye. He avoided the gaze. "You got out and took a quick look at my injured leg. As you did so, I could smell the alcohol from your breath. You said a plaster would do in my case. Then you gave me fifty dollars, got back in the car and drove away."

"That's right," Stacey confirmed. "That's exactly how it was!"

Jupiter looked at the doctor sternly. "You drove on without giving your name or address. That itself is an offence."

"My brother and I did not have the money for my treatment," Farryn said, "and I wanted to save my grandmother the trouble... so I tried to just forget about it."

"That certainly wasn't easy," Jupiter pointed out. "As you can see, Miss Stenseth drags one leg slightly when she walks. After all, a plaster was not enough. Her injury healed badly because as she had just said, she lacked the financial means for treatment. Unfortunately, this had considerable consequences for her career. Miss Stenseth had been about to be signed as a professional surfer for the Liquid Teal company shortly before the accident."

Dr Kooning snorted. "I'm about to cry!"

"Save the sarcasm," Jupiter remarked coolly. "Miss Stenseth's brother needed money urgently and saw no other way out. It's not exemplary behaviour, but at least partly understandable under the circumstances."

Dr Kooning gave him a nasty glare. "You don't believe that yourself, boy!"

"You're in a lot of trouble, sir!" Jupe continued unperturbed. "As far as I'm informed, your father-in-law still owns the Lancaster Clinic. He won't appreciate his only daughter's husband causing an accident while drunk on his way back from a date with a young musician at that!"

"I don't have to respond to any of this!" Kooning's nervousness suddenly turned to anger. "If you do not stop your dubious accusations, I'll have my team of lawyers come down hard on you! All of you!"

"Go ahead and do just that," Jupe said. "We now have enough witnesses to take you on."

Meanwhile, Jupiter's concentration was steadily decreasing. Again and again, he looked at the door but Cotta still had not come. Someone had to run out and stop Dylan Parks! Pete could not be surfing in a storm!

Bob looked around nervously. The wind had turned into a solid storm. The Pacific was churning and the craggy rocks of the bay were lapped by white foam. Some of them had only their sharp points sticking out of the water. Huge breakers thundered onto the stony beach.

A few onlookers had gathered at the top of the cliff. Among them were the two lackeys of Dylan Parks who were setting up a camera on a sturdy tripod. They also had a drone with them, Bob noticed, but they wouldn't get far with it in this weather.

Dylan sat on the headland rubbing wax on a brand-new surfboard. He was wearing a neon yellow suit that exactly matched the colour of the board. He waved briefly at the camera and grinned. Then he climbed crouched over the rocks.

Bob froze and glanced at his watch. The timing was not right! Where were the police officers Jupiter had asked for?

A few people shouted something after the surfer. Bob could barely make it out in the roar of the storm, but he assumed they were warnings. It definitely took courage to climb over the top of the rocks and not take the path on the side sheltered from the wind. Even though Dylan wasn't going to surf, he was putting himself in a risky situation. A gust caught him and almost threw him into the foaming water. He just managed to hold on.

Again, a few people cried out, but by then Parks had reached the top of the headland and climbed down the shallow side. Less than a minute later, he had disappeared from view.

Bob clawed at the railing that was fixed in front of the cliff's breaking edge. Inspector Cotta was too late!

Dylan Parks steered his board towards the boulder. Now he was no longer visible from the coast.

Pete swallowed. Plan A had apparently not worked. It was now down to Plan B—the storm surf was on! He took off his T-shirt and shorts and climbed towards Dylan in his wetsuit.

Dylan handed Pete the board. "Don't disappoint me!"

The Second Investigator said nothing. It took all his strength and concentration to climb into the water without being blown off the slippery stones.

The sea was a disorderly mass of foam. For a moment, Pete thought that the seething mass of water would simply sweep him down, but then a current caught him and pushed him a little way towards the bay. Soon he would be visible—a small yellow spot in the churning ocean.

Strangely, Pete still felt no fear. He knew himself that it was nonsensical to be afraid of curses, ghosts and demons, and at the same time to paddle fearlessly into the middle of the storm, but the fear just didn't set in. He was focussed.

He paddled and waited. Again and again, he was pushed under the water. Spray splashed towards him. The wind roared in his ears. The forces of nature made his board vibrate, but inside, Pete was quite calm.

"Now!" he thought, as a gigantic wave rolled in. He jumped onto his board. The next moment, the wave broke and formed a tunnel—a perfect tube.

While the surface was blown by the wind, the inside of the wave was easy to ride. Pete's fingertips cut through the cold water. Everything seemed to slow down. Somewhere ahead of him lay the exit. Pete concentrated only on not losing his grip.

"I can do it!" he thought—just before the masses of water collapsed on him.

Bob saw Pete disappear. He yelled and screamed, but the storm swallowed every word. A police car stopped by the road, but that hardly interested him now.

"Pete!" he yelled again.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Finley heading for the stairs to the beach. He was still limping. There was no way Finley would be able to get Pete out of there—not without a surfboard and not in this weather!

Just as Finley reached the stony beach, the yellow board reappeared and with it the neon yellow suit.

Bob breathed a sigh of relief. Pete had managed to fight his way to the surface. The waves pushed him inexorably towards the beach. Again and again, it looked as if the surfboard would be swallowed up by the sea after all. Twice it disappeared under a wave, twice it reappeared. After what felt like an eternity, Pete had finally reached the shore.

Bob ran down the steps. Finley was already wading through the knee-deep water and supporting Pete while the breakers slammed directly behind them.

18. The Super Hero of Rocky Beach

Small waves rolled gently onto the beach. A friendly September sun shone over Rocky Beach. Two weeks had passed since the storm. The Three Investigators sat on the beach together with Finley, Farryn and Matt. Dr Kooning's son had recovered sufficiently well from his injury.

"Sometimes I think I was wrong to spy on my father," Matt admitted.

"You just wanted to know the truth after the conversation you overheard," Jupiter said. "That's a noble goal, so it made sense to look for clues in your father's room."

"That's where I got the photos and the note," Matt confirmed. "In any case, my grandfather has sacked my father and my parents have separated," Matt reported. "That's not exactly a great outcome now, is it?"

"Your father just shouldn't have been driving drunk," Finley replied. "He brought it all on himself!"

"He was very aware that it wasn't okay," Matt explained, "but he was also afraid that everything would come out." True enough, after the police interrogation, everything had come out.

Around 9 pm on 17th August last year, Finley had been cycling a short distance behind Farryn when she was knocked down by Kooning's car. When Kooning came out, both brother and sister had had a good look at him, but not his car because the surroundings were dark. After Kooning had given Farryn the fifty dollars and inappropriate advice, he hurriedly drove off. During this entire incident, Stacey had remained in the car and both Finley and Farryn never knew that she was a witness.

Farryn had reported the incident to the police, but because of insufficient description of the driver and the car, and no other witnesses, the police had been unable to make any headway in their investigations. Meanwhile, for fear of being traced, Kooning had changed his car. A few months later, the police dropped the case.

About a month ago—almost a year after the incident—Finley was in Los Angeles and had happened to see Kooning. The doctor was on foot and Finley had been able to follow him inconspicuously to his apartment. Around that time, Finley's debt to Dylan Parks had accumulated a significant amount in interest. He had then decided to blackmail Kooning by contacting him and demanding a sum of money, else he would go to the police again.

In response to that, Kooning had hired Mr Blond to trace Finley, which he had done as evidenced by the two photos and the note. This had been witnessed by Matt who subsequently took the photos and the note. Then came the involvement of The Three Investigators... and the rest was history.

"I'm honestly glad that I can finally put this stupid 17th August to rest," Finley stated. "So please, no one mention this date again or I will react violently."

Pete laughed. "We know you are very capable of that."

"I still have a question," Matt interjected. "What happened to that thug who threatened Finley?"

"Dylan Parks," Juve said. "The police had been targeting him for some time, but could never prove anything. Thanks to our investigation, he was charged with several counts of

assault as well as false imprisonment. After Finley testified, two more people were willing to press charges against Parks, and I was able to add that he tied me up and locked me in a shed.”

“What about Mr Blond?” asked Farryn.

“Dr Kooning has revealed his identity,” Jupiter reported with satisfaction. “The man’s name is Marshall Keen. He’s a criminal who takes assignments from people who don’t want to get their own hands dirty. In our case, he was supposed to hand over the money and intimidate Finley properly, but that went wrong on the first handover.”

“That’s right,” Finley agreed. “When I was going to meet that blond man for the first time, Dylan, of all people, stopped me. He wanted his money, but I didn’t have it yet. That’s when he beat me up.”

“The bruise on the chin,” Pete said. “Surfing accident, ha!”

“Be that as it may,” Jupiter continued. “The second handover at Sycamore Trail failed again, as we all know. Besides, Keen had devised a plan for a lucrative deal. He wanted to blackmail Dr Kooning himself, but he lacked the crucial information for that.”

“And I didn’t even know anything about this!” Farryn marvelled.

Bob smiled at her. “But you are now benefiting most from your brother’s intervention—even if it wasn’t planned that way.”

She nodded. “Matt’s grandfather has contacted me. I can have my knee operated on again—at the Lancaster clinic in Michigan—all expenses paid. There’s a good chance I’ll be able to go pro for Liquid Teal after all... but it will be an uphill task for me as I have not surfed for over a year.”

“Then the dream of endless summer will come true for you, but not for Dylan!” Pete stated with satisfaction.

“Yes,” Finley confirmed. “Dylan Parks and his two lackeys have been fired by Liquid Teal.”

“Finley, what about the blackmail?” Matt interjected. “How could you get away with that?”

“I’m not off it!” Finley said and screwed up his face. “I have to do substantial community service. There’s hardly any time left for surfing but it’s still better than running from Dylan all the time and getting bruises.”

“What do you have to do,” Matt asked,

“I don’t know,” Finley replied. “I have to report to Inspector Cotta on Monday and see what he has in store for me.”

Jupiter suppressed a grin.

“At least,” Finley continued, “I don’t have to hang out on the beach all day with Superboy.”

“Don’t be so ungrateful!” Pete gave Finley a firm jab on his shoulder. “And don’t call me Superboy all the time.”

“Dream on, Superboy.”

“And it does fit!” Matt grinned. “Anyway, you’re the Super Hero of Rocky Beach right now.”

“Exactly!” Farryn added. “It can’t be helped. Like in the movies, if someone is in danger, you need a Super Hero to save them.”

“Enough talk for me!” Finley stood up and grabbed his surfboard. “Who’s coming in the water?”

“Not me,” Jupiter said quickly.

Pete was on his feet in a single bound. “Me!”

“Might as well,” Finley said. “I’ll show you how to do a proper hang ten.”

“No way, Stenseth,” Pete countered. “I’ll beat you at your own game.”

Then Bob called out: “Why not both of you do it together and finally, we’ll all get to see a hang twenty?”